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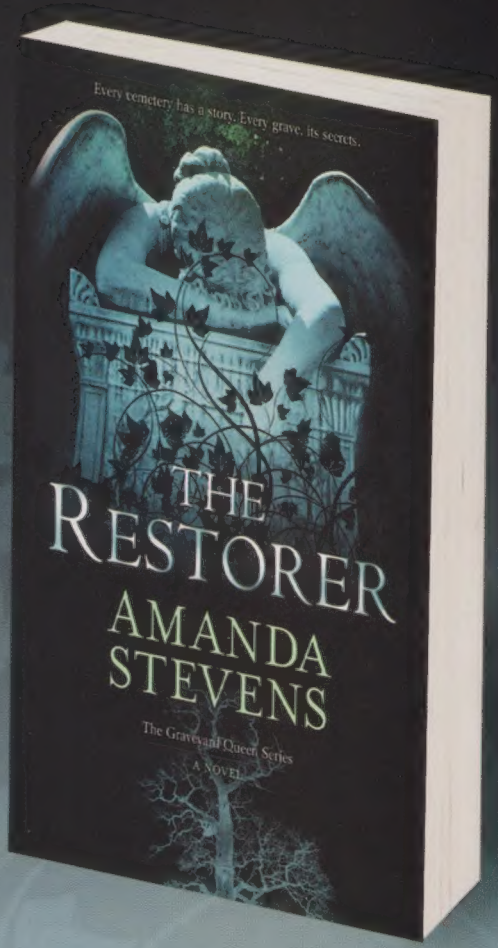

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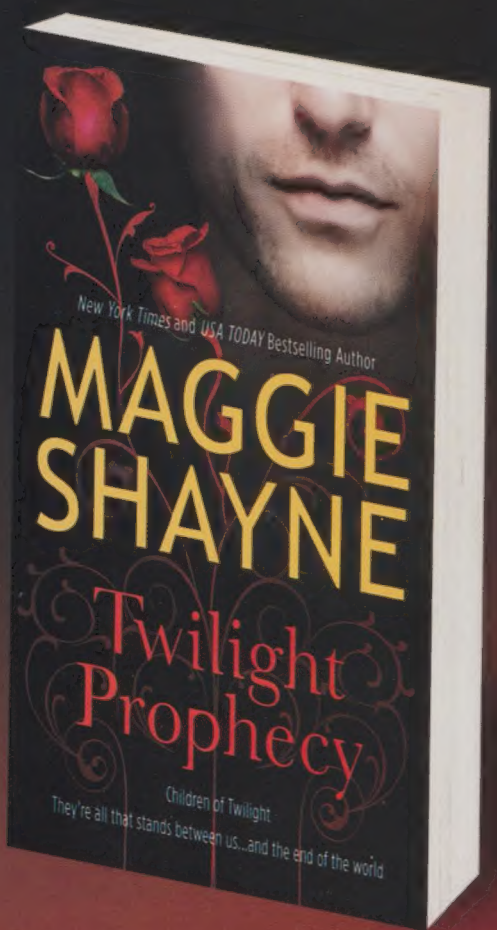
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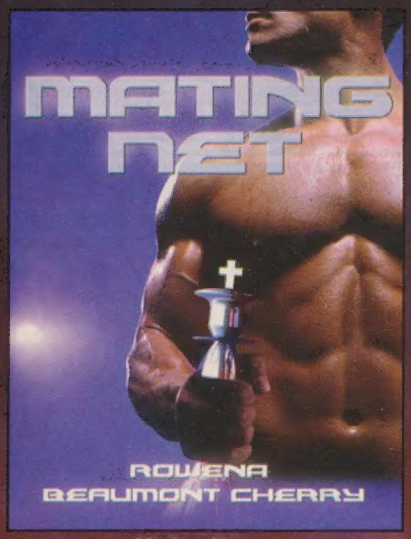

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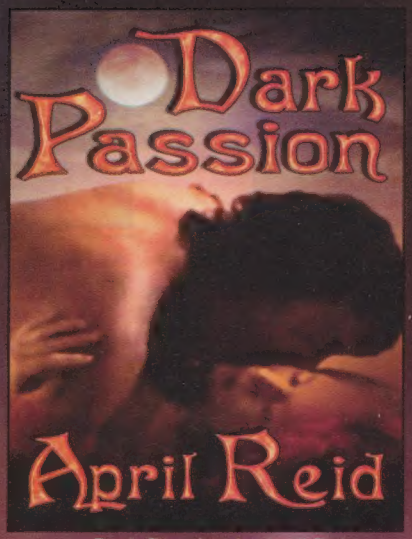

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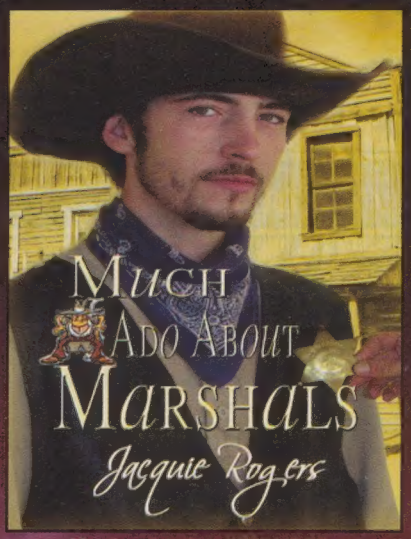

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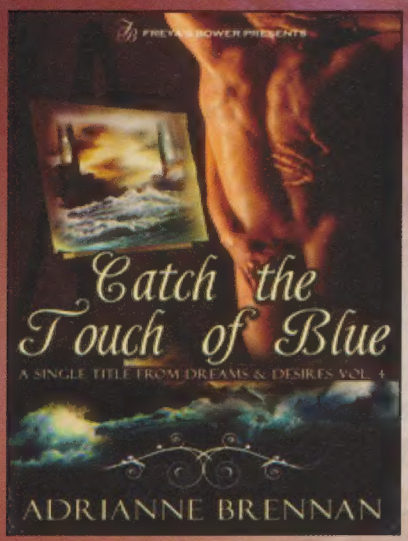

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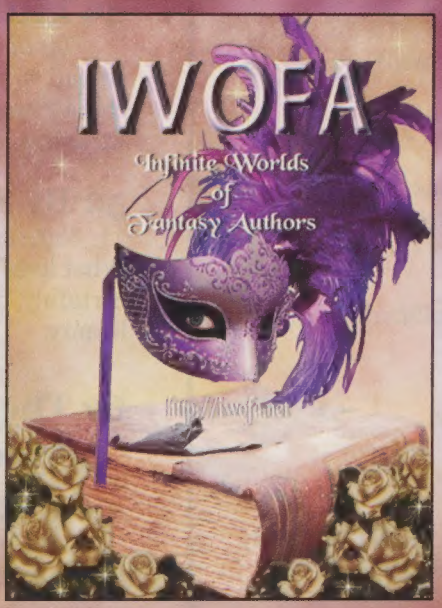

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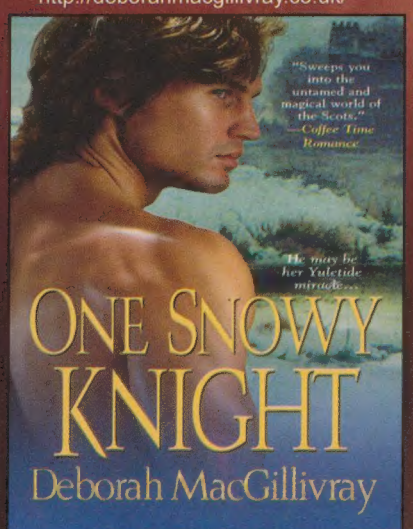
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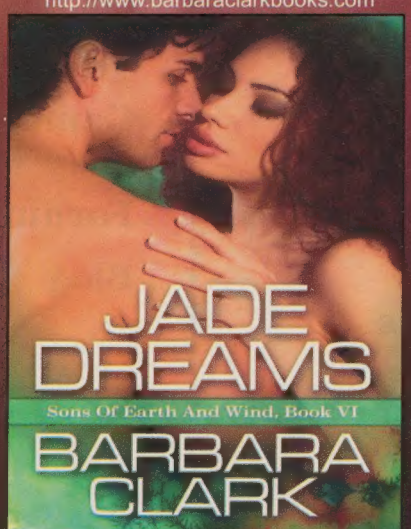

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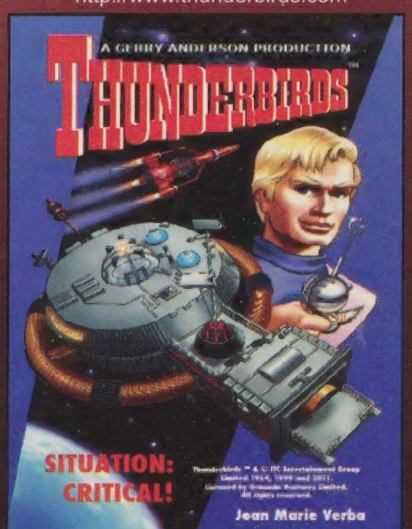

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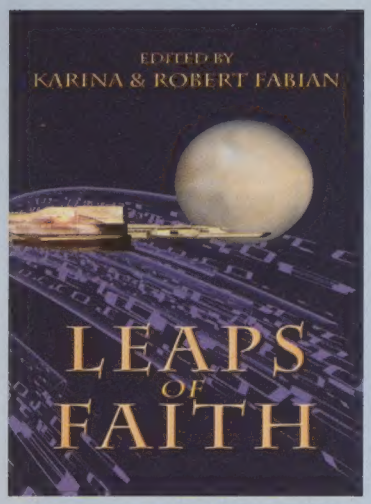

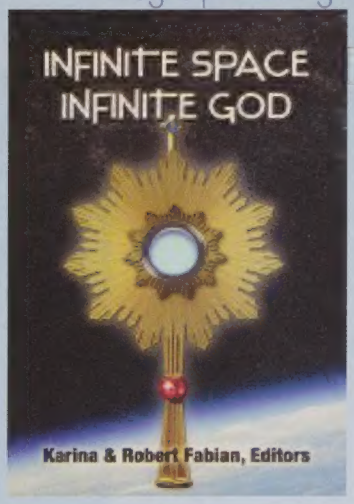

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Could a TV Show About Zombies Kill the Stigma Against Horror?

by Resa Nelson

Who could have imagined that a TV series about zombies—graphic violence and all—would not only air on a well respected cable channel but win critical acclaim as well as hearts and minds all over the world?

If you haven't already seen Season One of *The Walking Dead* on AMC (available on DVD on March 8), you're missing out on "the best new show on TV" according to Entertainment Weekly. Yes, the violence and zombie makeup are very realistic, extraordinarily graphic, and stomach churning. Yes, it's a scary show. Yes, it's troubling to watch.

The Walking Dead

But it's also mesmerizing, heartfelt, and thoroughly addicting. In other words, it's the kind of TV series that's very likely to be nominated and possibly even win Emmys.

A show of hands, please: in its seven-year history, were you baffled and disappointed and maybe even outraged that the Emmy Award barely acknowledged *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*? How was it possible that a series with such brilliant writing, acting, and directing could be ignored year after year? Sure, Joss Whedon was nominated for an Emmy for writing the episode "Hush," but most nominations for Buffy were for makeup and hair and special effects. Was the snub a result of the genre instead of the work itself? It's disheartening to think that Hollywood can so easily dismiss a series on the basis of genre, but what if those days may be ending, thanks to *The Walking Dead* and AMC. Two out of AMC's three other series, *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*, have been powerhouses at the Emmy Awards. AMC is the only television network in history to win the Golden Globe Award for Best TV Series (Drama) three years in a row. It's also the only basic cable network to win back-to-back Emmy Awards for Outstanding Drama Series. AMC's motto is "Story Matters Here," and they're not kidding. At press time, *The Walking Dead* was nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best TV Series.

How did a show about zombies get the green light for TV?

It began with an ongoing comic book series of the same name written by Robert Kirkman that premiered in 2003. Screenwriter and executive producer Frank Darabont (*The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*) is a three-time nominee for the Oscar Award and a self-described longtime fan of zombies. He became a fan of Kirkman's comics and was intrigued by them. Darabont didn't think it was worth making yet another zombie movie, but the idea of doing something bold and character-driven for TV intrigued him. Gale Hurd, one of the most powerful women in Hollywood (who has produced movies ranging from *Aliens* to the *Terminator* series, as well as projects like the SCI FI Channel's *Taken* miniseries) joined forces with Darabont, making them a team to be reckoned with.

At ComicCon 2010, the creative team and actors talked about *The Walking Dead*. Describing her interest in the series, Hurd said, "It delivers on the dramatic level, which to me is the benefit of television. At times you have to cut back in character and story in movies. And in television you get to delve very deeply into characters."

When Darabont and Hurd took their idea for turning The Walking Dead comics into a TV series to AMC, they had Senior Vice President Joel Stillerman at "hello." Stillerman says the decision to say yes to *The Walking Dead* was easy because its storytelling strength made it a great fit with what AMC wants to deliver to its audience. He also saw a unique opportunity for introducing the series to a perfect audience. For the past 14 years, AMC has run a special "Fearfest" during October, showing a marathon of thriller and horror movies during the two weeks leading up to Halloween. AMC's game

plan was to premiere *The Walking Dead* on Halloween night as a special feature of Fearfest. AMC partnered with FOX for a global launch of *The Walking Dead*'s debut to 250 million households in 120 countries and 30 languages, pretty much simultaneously. With this goal in mind, the producers raced to make the six episodes that comprise the first season. That race resulted in shooting during a sweltering Atlanta summer. Actress Laurie Holden (Stephen King's *The Mist*), who plays Andrea, claims the temperature on the rooftop set reached over 150 degrees. Darabont kept his cool by draping ice-soaked towels over his head to keep from passing out while he directed episodes. Thanks to the success of Season One, the second season will include 13 episodes and is likely to begin on Halloween this year.

What exactly is *The Walking Dead* about?

The story begins in the world as we know it. In a small rural town outside of Atlanta, Sheriff Deputy Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln of *Love Actually*) is a good man who loves his wife and young son. When he and his best friend and co-worker Shane (Jon Bernthal of *The Ghost Writer*) do their part to stop a criminal on the run, Rick is shot and his wounds are severe enough to put him in the hospital, where he goes into a coma for a few weeks. Eventually, he wakes up to an eerily empty hospital. As Rick walks the deserted hallways, he finds the doors to the cafeteria have been chained shut. Someone has spray painted a warning on them. Slowly, the doors ease open just an inch or two, and creepy looking fingers and hands wriggle through the crack. Outside the hospital, Rick discovers neatly arranged and covered bodies. The world appears quiet. Abandoned cars litter the streets. The power grid is down: there is no electricity or phone service. It looks as if some kind of apocalypse has left everything in a shambles.

He soon comes to realize that life isn't as safe as it used to be. People have died and come back to life as zombies, mere shells of who they used to be. The living refer to them as "walkers" or "geeks." The story keeps a nice edge of realism when Rick figures out that it's not difficult to stop just one zombie. The problem is facing a crowd of them. All of the zombies are starving, and they feed on the living. While zombies seem dimwitted, their sense of smell is keen. Zombies have no problem finding people who are still alive. All they have to do is follow their noses. They also follow the sound of a gunshot, presumably because they've figured out it comes from a weapon used by the living. Unfortunately, the only way to kill a zombie is to destroy its brain. Shooting it in the head works, but the sound attracts more zombies. That leaves options such as decapitation and destroying the zombie's head with something like a hatchet, a baseball bat, or an arrow shot from a crossbow.

The Walking Dead Episode 1

Rick makes his way back home only to discover his wife and son have disappeared. With the help of a neighbor, he realizes all the family photos are missing, which he takes as a sure sign that his family escaped. His mission is to find them.

One element that sets The Walking Dead apart from more traditional zombie stories is the hint of humanity that often remains in the zombies. For example, early the in Season One, Rick is alone at a gas station surrounded by abandoned cars and dead bodies. One zombie approaches him: a little girl wearing a nightgown and clinging to a stuffed animal. He shoots her in the forehead. Allowing her to live would put other people in danger, because a zombie's bite kills the living and turns them into zombies as well. In another scene, Rick happens upon a female zombie whose lower body is missing. She's little more than a partial torso with arms and a head. And she's obviously starving, probably more so than the other zombies. The only way she can move is to drag herself by crawling with her arms. Even when looking at zombies that have been so severely mangled, it's still easy to see and remember that they were once one of us. They aren't monsters. They're people who have died but whose bodies have come back to life and with few if any memories of who they used to be. *The Walking Dead* strikes a perfect balance of understated poignancy without becoming maudlin.

Darabont and Hurd keep comic writer Kirkman in the loop, for example, by having him write Episode Four of the first season. "You hear horror stories about adaptations, and every step of the way along the way, everything has been perfect," Kirkman said about his involvement with the TV series. "It's really bizarre. I feel blessed."

At the same time, Darabont has no plans to follow the comic's story lines religiously. On one hand, the TV series is very similar to the

comic in terms of characters and story and even the zombie makeup by Greg Nicotera (*Drag Me to Hell, The Mist*), which often duplicates the comic's illustrations. (Because the series employs hundreds of extras as zombies, Nicotera ran a zombie school in Atlanta and chose the thinnest people he could find to portray the starving dead.) Darabont describes the comic as a good template, but he also says there are plans to take detours from Kirkman's original work, veering off the path to explore new ideas and then veering back on the path. Kirkman says he's interested in the co-existence of his comics and the TV series based on them, so he continues to work on the comic book.

Ironically, many of the actors had never heard of the comic. After making an audition tape, Lincoln went to a comic book store in his native London and asked the clerk what he knew about Kirkman's series. The clerk led Lincoln to a wall filled with *The Walking Dead* comics, describing that the series as the single greatest and most successful comic book in the store.

The Walking Dead
Episode 2

Sarah Wayne Callies (TV's *Prison Break*) plays Lori Grimes, Rick's wife. Previously, she'd never read a comic book or seen a horror movie in her life. That probably explains why she says she's now having nightmares. "I'm a card-carrying chicken, and Greg Nicotera has ruined my life," Callies laughs. "I've been going home trying to get out of my head what the show has put in."

Callies describes the series as being primarily a show about family and community as well as breakdown and survival. Describing her character, Callies says, "She's a woman, who as [Rick and Shane] work to protect the bodies of the survivors, I think she's trying to protect their humanity. I think she's somebody who's really trying to make sure that just being alive isn't what we're doing and that we retain some sense of who it is that we want to be and our rituals of being human and our hearts, even when those hearts are so utterly walled in by fear that they're hard to access."

In addition to strong characterization and solid thematic elements, *The Walking Dead* delves fearlessly into moral and ethical dilemmas. Imagine living in a world where zombies outnumber the living by what seems like insurmountable odds. What happens when you only have a few seconds to escape an oncoming crowd of zombies and a racist needs your help? Do you risk your own life to save the life of a racist? What happens when people you love are killed by zombies and it's only a matter of time before they rise as zombies themselves? What do you do if you're bitten by a zombie? Do you sit around and wait to become a killing machine? Do you commit suicide? Or do you ask someone to kill you, thereby turning that person into a murderer?

These questions not only add to the richness of the series; in some ways they reflect the way our own world has changed within the past decade. Many people who found themselves in the midst of the terrorist attack on 9/11 faced horrific decisions and took heroic action, leaving the rest of us to wonder what we would have done in their shoes. Terrorism has become a lingering threat in the United States instead of just a news report about something that happens in other countries. Years after the dot-com crash rocked the high tech world, an unthinkable economic crash destroyed the hopes and dreams of millions of people, including many who lost their homes. With unemployment rates high, most of us know good, hard-working people who have been out of a job for two years or longer. Everything that's gone wrong during the past decade resonates with *The Walking Dead*, which may be why it's the right TV series at the right time. Historically, people have embraced fantasy during times of war and other hardships. *The Walking Dead* validates our own experiences during the past ten years while at the same time showing us that things could be far, far worse than they are right now.

The Most Disturbing Zombie Movie You've Probably Never Seen

By Resa Nelson

While *The Walking Dead* is making a huge splash on TV, a more disturbing zombie movie lurks on forgotten shelves in video rental stores and in the cyber-depths of Netflix. *Deadgirl* (2008) is arguably the most horrific zombie movie ever made. It doesn't boast the eye-popping visual effects of *The Walking Dead* or recent zombie movies. It isn't about hoards of zombies hungering for human flesh. Instead, it's a zombie movie flipped upside down: the real monsters are the living, not the dead.

Deadgirl focuses on the friendship of two high school boys: good guy Rickie (played by Shiloh Fernandez of TV's *Gossip Girl* and Jericho) and troublemaker J.T. (Noah Segan of *Cabin Fever 2*). One day J.T. convinces Rickie to play hooky, and they end up exploring a nearby abandoned mental asylum. While walking through the creepy and empty hallways, they're suddenly confronted by a snarling dog that chases them into a forgotten corner of the basement, where they pry open a rusted door to another room. Once inside, they're shocked by the sight of what seems to be a dead body on a table, covered in plastic. First believing they might have accidentally stumbled upon the lair of a serial killer, the teens scramble to figure out how to escape. But the next shock comes when the body moves. Rickie and J.T. remove the plastic and find a naked girl chained to the table. The friendship begins to crack when Rickie insists on getting help for the girl and J.T. proposes they use her for their own pleasure instead.

It soon becomes apparent that this isn't any ordinary girl. She doesn't speak or show any ability to communicate. Her skin is gray. And although she's chained to the table, she takes any opportunity to try to take a bite out of anyone who steps within her reach. Although the word "zombie" never enters the conversation, she's obviously dead and can't be killed. The teens speculate that because they found her in a mental asylum, she could be the victim of some kind of experimentation that went terribly wrong and ended up lost and forgotten when the asylum was shut down. Rickie still believes she deserves to be treated as if she were alive, while J.T. sees no reason to treat her as anything but an object ready to be used.

Deadgirl

While Rickie and J.T. struggle with their opinions and friendship as they make repeated visits to the zombie girl, the situation escalates and threatens to get out of control. At the same time, the bizarre situation at the abandoned mental asylum plays in contrast to the teen's normal, everyday life at home and school. At the same time Rickie lobbies to help the dead girl, he's dealing with his crush on a girl who seems to be out of his league and already has a popular boyfriend. The scenes in the asylum are physically and emotionally graphic and violent, while the world outside is mundane and benign. One could argue that the asylum represents the hidden and true desires of people's interior lives while the outside world represents the roles and personas that people project in their exterior lives.

Deadgirl is not for everyone, due to the graphic way it portrays violence against women. Some viewers might experience it as a waste of time, wishing they'd never seen it. Other may find themselves thinking about it for days. The graphic violence isn't gratuitous. Although difficult and painful to watch, it's critical to understanding the characters and the story. On one hand, the movie is a zombie film that switches the roles of monsters and victims. The real horror is the ease with which some characters scheme to use the dead girl like a piece of meat. Is the fact that she's a zombie reason to treat her inhumanely? Or does J.T. simply resort to rape because he knows he can get away with it? The zombie girl can't complain or even explain what has happened. And if she could, would she have the same rights as a living girl? Does the fact that she's dead mean she's lost her humanity? Is it cruel to harm a zombie who is tied and bound to the point of being incapable of hurting the living?

In the DVD's extra features, the filmmakers describe *Deadgirl* as a story that's mostly about the friendship between Rickie and J.T. But the movie's real strength is the different ways in which the boys first react to the dead girl and the decisions each one makes as the situation grows worse with every passing moment.

Vampires in Folklore and Literature

by Theodora Goss

I don't like sparkly vampires.

Unless you've been hiding in the sewers of London, drinking the blood of rats and waiting until everyone aware of your existence dies off, you'll know that I'm referring to the vampires in Stephenie Meyer's Twilight novels: *Twilight, Eclipse, New Moon,* and *Breaking Dawn.* In interviews, Meyers had said that she was not familiar with, and did not research, the folklore or literature of vampires before writing her novels, and she does indeed create vampire rules that have little resemblance to the rules established in canonical novels such as *Dracula.* It surprises me, when I teach those novels, how unfamiliar my students are with traditional vampires. Once, one of them said to me, after reading Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla," "It's nice to see a vampire that sucks blood."

"It's nice to see a vampire that sucks blood."

However you feel about sparkly vampires, it's worth exploring the vampire tradition, because vampires seem with us to stay; we have invited them in, and they have inhabited our culture, moving into small towns and suburbs from Bon Temps, Louisiana to Sunnydale, California, and even selling Ray Ban sunglasses. There are a number of places you can go to experience modern vampires that don't sparkle: Anne Rice's novels *Interview with a Vampire, The Vampire Lestat,* and *Queen of the Damned* and the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have attained the status of cult classics, while Charlaine Harris' *Southern Vampire Mysteries* can be seen both on the bookstores shelves and in the television series *True Blood.* But their ancestors are the vampires of folklore and literature, who are a properly bloodthirsty lot.

Le Vampire by R. de Moraine

I. The Vampire of Folklore

Tales about creatures resembling vampires have existed in various cultures, probably back to the beginning of human culture itself. Such creatures may be demons that suck blood or reanimated corpses. In the Sanskrit *Baital-Pachisi,* for example, King Vikram promises a magician that he will bring him a Baital, a spirit that animates dead bodies. He finds the Baital hanging from a tree like a bat. The Baital tells Vikram stories that end in riddles, and Vikram must guess the riddles or lose the Baital before he can present it to the magician. When Sir Richard Burton translated the *Baital-Pachisi* into English, he called it *Vikram and the Vampire.*

However, by calling the Baital a vampire, Burton was connecting his story to what had already become a popular literary figure. Like any author, he was attempting to boost sales. The vampire as we know it comes primarily from Eastern European folklore, filtered through a long literary tradition. Burton's friend Bram Stoker may have been influenced by the story of the Baital in his creation of Count Dracula; however, Stoker was certainly more heavily influenced by Eastern European folklore.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the word "vampire" is Slavonic in origin, "occurring in the same form in Russian, Polish, Czech, Serbian, and Bulgarian, with such variants as Bulgarian *vapir, vepir,* Ruthenian *vepyr, vopyr, opyr,* Russian *upir, upyr,* Polish *upior,*" although the linguist Franz von Miklosich suggests that the word is ultimately derived from the Turkish *uber,* or witch.[1] According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 9th edition, belief in vampires was prevalent "in Slavonic lands, as in Russia (especially White Russia and the Ukraine), Poland, and Servia, and among the Czechs of Bohemia and the other Slavonic races of Austria." Since the 9th edition was published in the late nineteenth century, it can give us an accurate representation of what was believed about vampires during the time period when

1 *Oxford English Dictionary Online,* s.v. "vampire," accessed December 30, 2010, http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/221303.

the most important literary vampires, such as Carmilla and Count Dracula, were created. It defines a vampire as "the soul of a dead man which quits the buried body by night to suck the blood of living persons," and mentions a number of vampire rules, some of which have made it into the modern vampire canon. Suicides become vampires, as do people who have been cursed by their parents or the church. Since vampires feast off the blood of the living, when they are found in their graves, they appear to be fresh and rosy, replete with blood. The vampire can be stopped by a stake through the heart, decapitation, or burning. However, pouring a mixture of boiling water and vinegar over the grave also works.[2]

I've mentioned vampire rules because Eastern European folklore is filled with rules governing how vampires are created, how they feast on the living, and how they must be destroyed. In "The Vampire in Roumania," Agnes Murgoci states that a vampire can be identified as follows: his or her family and livestock begin dying; a hole the size of a serpent is found near the grave, because vampires leave their graves by such holes; a white horse or gander refuses to walk over the grave; the corpse is red in the face, or has a foot retracted and forced into a corner of the coffin, or the mouth is filled with blood. Vampires can be stopped or destroyed in various ways. A stake can be driven through the heart, but in one district a needle is recommended while in another, a red-hot iron is preferred. Small stones, garlic, or millet can be put into the mouth. A nail can be put under the tongue. The coffin can be bound with canes of wild roses, or nine distaffs can be driven into the grave. Tow can be strewn on the grave and set on fire, to singe the vampire. Vampires are most active on St. Andrew's Day and St. George's Day, when garlic should be put on the windows and doors of the house, and all the cows should be rubbed with garlic. All lamps should be put out, all implements in the house should be turned upside down, and all of the inhabitants should turn their shirts inside out. Perhaps the most interesting suggestion is not to sleep at all on such nights, but to tell stories, for vampires cannot approach while stories are being told. Burton's Baital must not have heard of that rule![3]

What are we to make of this variety? As Murgoci suggests, although there are common elements, each district had its own particular set of beliefs about vampires. Jan Louis Perkowski, a scholar of Slavic language and literature, examined nineteen stories about vampires from different geographical areas and concluded that although all of them referred to an undead creature returning to prey on the living, no one of them contained all of the story elements he identified. In some, a vampire is created when a cat walks over its grave; in at least one, the vampire causes excessive rain or hail. The vampire is dispatched in different ways in each of the stories: in one, it is burned and the ashes thrown to the winds, in another, it is reburied with millet. One vampire is stopped when a bottle of wine is buried near its grave, retrieved six weeks later, and drunk.[4] Perkowski concludes that although the vampire rules differ from district to district, they all serve a single function: to magically deal with the very real problem of unexplained deaths, particularly due to contagious illness. He writes, "On the psychological level, illness and death of unknown origin, or even just the fear of them, evoke a condition of panic through frustration. The situation is hopeless. You cannot comprehend it and there is nothing you can do to help." How does a family or village respond to such an illness?

The Great Vampire Bat from Guyana, from *Histoire Naturelle* by Comte de Buffon

Nowadays, we would call the Centers for Disease Control. But before the advent of modern medicine, the solution was often magical. Perkowski continues:

> On the sociological level, we find that the precautions and cures in their variety tend to be village specific. Each community establishes its own meaningful ceremony, choosing from its own stock of symbols to perform anxiety-relieving physical acts. The ill may not be cured nor the dead resurrected, but the anxiety, panic, and fear of the victims' relatives can be allayed through those community rituals and life can revert to its normal course.[5]

In such rituals, the vampire functioned as scapegoat. Staking, decapitating, or burning it allowed the villagers to confront their fears, expel the contagion that had come to their village, and heal the community after a period of grief and loss.

This interpretation is reinforced by accounts

2 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed., s.v. "Vampire," accessed December 30, 2010, http://www.1902encyclopedia.com/V/VAM/vampire.html.
3 Agnes Murgoci, "The Vampire in Roumania," *The Vampire: A Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 18-9, 21-3.
4 Jan Louis Perkowski, "The Romanian Folkloric Vampire," *The Vampire: A Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 42-4.
5 Ibid. 44-5.

of supposed vampire attacks. The remedy for such supposed attacks was of course spelled out in folklore: in parts of Eastern Europe, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, corpses were dug up in the belief that they were vampires. Church documents mention priests attempting to eradicate both the belief in vampires and the mutilation of corpses. The following account of one such attack was published in *Ion Creanga*, the Romanian journal of folklore, in 1914:

> Some fifteen years ago, in Amărăşti in the north of Dolj, an old woman, the mother of the peasant Dinu Gheorghiţa, died. After some months, the children of her eldest son began to die, one after the other, and, after that, the children of her youngest son. The sons became anxious, dug her up one night, cut her in two, and buried her again. Still the deaths did not cease. They dug her up a second time, and what did they see? The body whole without a wound. It was a great marvel.
>
> They took her and carried her into the forest, and put her under a great tree in a remote part of the forest. There they disemboweled her, took out her heart, from which blood was flowing, cut it in four, put it on hot cinders, and burnt it. They took the ashes and gave them to children to drink with water. They threw the body on the fire, burnt it, and buried the ashes of the body. Then the deaths ceased.[6]

Lord Byron by Thomas Phillips

As this account indicates, at the end of the nineteenth century, around the time *Dracula* was published, the belief in vampires was still strong, at least in Romania. Such beliefs never seem to die out entirely; like the vampire itself, they return to plague the living. In 2002, the BBC reported rumors of vampire attacks in the African nation of Malawi. At least one man was stoned to death as a suspected vampire before the president denounced such rumors as political propaganda.[7]

II. The Literary Vampire

But the vampires of folklore, who can be created by a cat walking over a grave and stopped by a nail placed under the tongue, don't sound much like the literary vampires we're familiar with. Those vampires are the descendants of the first important literary vampire, at least in English literature: John Polidori's Lord Ruthven in "The Vampyre." There had certainly been vampires in literature before Lord Ruthven, such as the female vampire who is condemned to drink the blood of the man she loves in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem "The Bride of Corinth." However, it was "The Vampyre" and the various theatrical adaptations of Polidori's story that popularized vampires across Europe. Even in the early nineteenth century, the vampire was a spectacle; it is no wonder that vampires have proven so popular in movie versions.

Although they are monsters, they look enough like us that actors can portray them with white grease paint and artificial fangs, and their penchant for pursuing attractive female victims makes for satisfying melodrama.

In Lord Ruthven, Polidori gives us the ruthless, aristocratic vampire that dominates vampire literature from *Dracula* to *The Vampire Lestat*, although Lestat himself breaks with that tradition to become the more compassionate vampire of modern interpretations. In her preface to *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley mentions Polidori as one of those who gathered with Shelley, her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron on those rainy days in the Villa Diodati to tell ghost stories. Shelley did not think much of Polidori's literary effort: she writes that "poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady," which he soon abandoned.[8] However, based on the story that Byron began but never completed, Polidori wrote "The Vampyre."

By that time, Polidori and Byron were no longer friends, and it is commonly accepted that Lord Ruthven is based on Byron: he too is mad, bad, and dangerous to know. It is clear in the novel that the vampire is a figure out of folklore. The protagonist, Mr. Aubrey, travels to Greece, where he meets a beautiful woman named Ianthe, whose family tells him about vampires. As in "Carmilla" and *Dracula*, the common folk know all about vampires, while the educated elite are too rational for such superstitions. However, these vampires do not follow the vampire rules of folklore, or even the more modern rules we have learned from *Dracula* and various movie versions. In "The Vampyre," the vampire needs to ingest blood, but he does not sleep in a coffin, and he is not affected by daylight, crosses, or garlic. We are not even told how he can be destroyed. Indeed, when Lord Ruthven is shot by thieves, his body is exposed to the first rays of the moon, and he mysteriously revives. The story is also missing a figure that will become central in *Dracula*: the vampire slayer. In the end, Lord Ruthven prevails. He kills Ianthe and marries Aubrey's sister, whom he kills on their wedding night. We are told that she "had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!"[9]

6 Quoted in Murgoci, "The Vampire in Roumania," *The Vampire: A Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 16.
7 BBC News, "'Vampries' Strike Malawi Villages," December 23, 2002, accessed December 30, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/af ica/2602461.stm.
8 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. Maurice Hindle (New York: Penguin, 1992),
9 John Polidori, "The Vampyre," *The Penguin Book of Vampire Stories*, ed. Alan Ryan (New York: Penguin, 1987), 24.

The next important development in the vampire canon was a work of no particular literary merit but enormous popularity: *Varney the Vampyre, or, The Feast of Blood*, a serial written by James Malcolm Rymer that appeared weekly over the course of two years. It was cheap, lurid, and melodramatic, no doubt a satisfying combination for a Victorian audience. The following passage, in which the vampire Sir Frances Varney pursues the beautiful Flora Bannerworth, is representative of Rymer's writing style:

> The storm has ceased — all is still. The winds are hushed; the church clock proclaims the hour of one: a hissing sound comes from the throat of the hideous being, and he raises his long, gaunt arms — the lips move. He advances. The girl places one small foot from the bed on to the floor. She is unconsciously dragging the clothing with her. The door of the room is in that direction — can she reach it?
>
> Has she power to walk?—can she withdraw her eyes from the face of the intruder, and so break the hideous charm? God of Heaven! is it real, or some dream so like reality as to nearly overturn the judgement forever?

Do you think Flora is going to get away? No, me neither. Rymer's audience wasn't paying for the vampire to be defeated, at least not this early in the narrative. And sure enough, the chapter ends, *"The girl has swooned, and the vampire is at his hideous repast!"*[10] In this passage, we see important themes that first appeared in Polidori's novel: the ruthless aristocratic vampire, the beautiful female victim, and writing that focuses on shock value, on the horror of the vampire feeding.

Beautiful female victims are a staple of vampire fiction, but the next important development in the literary tradition presented the public with something considerably more subtle, and shockingly subversive if it had not been concealed as gothic horror: a beautiful female vampire who both seduces and feasts. Sheridan Le Fanu's Carmilla is perhaps the most interesting vampire of all, a beautiful girl who feasts savagely on the peasant girls of the village, but takes the time to seduce the heroine, Laura, whom she intends to turn into a vampire.

Carmilla is a much more interesting vampire than either Lord Ruthven or Sir Frances Varney. For one thing, she can turn into a black cat and feed on her victims in that form. For another, she actually falls in love. She places her arms around Laura's neck and murmurs into her ear,

> Dearest, your little heart is wounded; think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible laws of my strength and weakness; if your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours. In the rapture of my enormous humiliation I live in your warm life, and you shall die — die, sweetly die — into mine. I cannot help it; as I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others, and learn the rapture of that cruelty, which yet is love . . .[11]

Translated out of vampirese, this means "I'm going to suck your blood and turn you into a vampire. Then you're going to turn other people into vampires." It is feeding as love and seduction — a staple of vampire movies, in which vampires have become the alluring creatures of *The Vampire Lestat* and *Twilight*. In "Carmilla," Le Fanu gives us two important additions to the vampire tradition. The first is the beautiful, seductive vampire. The second is the vampire slayer. Baron Vordenburg, who identifies Carmilla as a vampire and locates her tomb so she can be killed, is the prototype for Professor Van Helsing, and perhaps even Rupert Giles in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. On the other hand, Buffy herself is a modern version of Laura, the blonde heroine, who seems to have taken up vampire slaying.

Carmilla by David Henry Friston

"Carmilla" directly influenced Bram Stoker's writing of *Dracula*. The novel was originally

10 James Malcolm Rymer, "Varney the Vampire, or, the Feast of Blood", *The Penguin Book of Vampire Stories*, ed. Alan Ryan (New York: Penguin, 1987), 30.

11 J. Sheridan Le Fanu, "Carmilla." *The Penguin Book of Vampire Stories*, ed. Alan Ryan (New York: Penguin, 1987), 89.

supposed to contain a chapter in which Jonathan Harker meets with a beautiful female vampire, but the chapter was later deleted and published as a separate story, "Dracula's Guest."

That beautiful vampire remained in the novel as one of Count Dracula's brides, and Jonathan Harker has a vague recollection of meeting her — although he does so only in the deleted chapter.

Before *Dracula,* the literary tradition refers to few of the sorts of vampire rules contained in folklore. Carmilla must sleep in her grave each day, and she is restricted in her choice of names— they must contain the letters of her real name, Mircalla. In "Carmilla," suicides become vampires and infect others, who also become vampires. They must drink blood, and they are killed by a stake, decapitation, and burning. But it is in *Dracula* that the literary vampire becomes subject to the modern rules.

Vlad the Impaler

For many years, scholars believed that Bram Stoker was a relatively careless writer, a creator of pulp fiction in the tradition of Rymer. However, the discovery of his working notes revealed that *Dracula* is a carefully researched and constructed text. Stoker took most of his vampire rules from Emily Gerard's *The Land Beyond the Forest,* about Transylvanian customs and beliefs. Gerard was a popular novelist who became familiar with vampire folklore when her husband, an Austo-Hungarian cavalry officer, was stationed in Transylvania. *The Land Beyond the Forest* mentions many of the vampire rules found in Murgoci's "The Vampire in Roumania," and many of these rules found their way into Stoker's novel, including the vampire's aversion to garlic. Count Dracula is the first literary vampire with that particular limitation. In *Dracula,* we find most of the rules modern vampires have inherited: the vampire cannot be seen in the mirror, he can transform into a bat, and he must be invited in. These are staples of vampires movies, although the most important rule of all comes not from *Dracula* but from the movies themselves: Count Dracula is not affected by sunlight, and one of the most frightening moments in the novel occurs when Mina Harker sees him walking about in the middle of the day in Piccadilly Circus. It is in the movies that vampires become creatures of the dark.

In his research, Stoker must have come across a reference to Vlad Tepes, the Wallachian Voivode, or military leader, who was infamous for impaling his enemies on stakes. Van Helsing identifies the Count as "that

Count Orlock from the film *Nosferatu*

Voivode Dracula who won his name against the Turk, over the great river on the very frontier of Turkey-land,"[12] and Vlad was indeed famous for his battles against the Turks. His father had been inducted into the religious and military Order of the Dragon, and had taken the name Dracul, the Wallachian for dragon. The name Dracula identified Vlad as the dragon's son.[13] Vlad's identity as the "real" Dracula was popularized by Radu Florescu and Raymond T. McNally's *In Search of Dracula.* Florescu and McNally suggested that Stoker learned of Vlad's history from the Hungarian historian Ármin Vámbéry, who is immortalized as Van Helsing's "friend Arminius, of Buda-Pesth University."[14] Although Elizabeth Miller has contested this interpretation, arguing that Stoker actually knew little about Vlad, the Impaler has given us an important component of the vampire legend: it is only after learning about Vlad that Stoker changed his Count's name to Dracula. It is difficult to imagine that he would have become the most important literary vampire with the name Stoker originally intended: Count Wampyr!

Since *Dracula,* the literary vampire has taken many forms. In C.L. Moore's "Shambleau," the vampire is found on Mars. In Fritz Leiber's "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes," we see the vampiric power of advertisement; his story is a commentary on our consumer culture, which literally *consumes.* Suzy McKee Charnas' "Unicorn Tapestery" shows us the vampire in the psychoanalyst's office. Why so many vampires, in so many configurations? Like most monsters, vampires are ultimately metaphors. They represent what we need them to represent

12. Bram Stoker, *Dracula,* ed. Maurice Hindle (New York: Penguin, 1993), 309.
13 Elizabeth Miller, "Vlad the Impaler: Brief History," accessed December 30, 2010, http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~emiller/vlad.html.
14 Ibid.

at a particular time: a contagion that must be eliminated from the village, forbidden desires that can only be explored in a story or on the movie screen, even the fears evoked by our technological culture, which so often seems to suck our time and energy. What does it say about us, then, that we have come to sparkly vampires? Perhaps only that we have romanticized the vampire as much as we can. No matter how sympathetic we make them, giving them souls or detective agencies, they want to suck our blood. In the end, even the sparkly ones bite.

The Vampire by Philip Burne-Jones

Selected Literature and Art:

Blackwood, Algernon. "The Transfer." 1912.
Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. "Good Lady Ducayne." 1896.
Burne-Jones, Philip. *The Vampire*. 1897.
Burton, Sir Richard. *Vikam and the Vampire or Tales of Hindu Devilry*. 1870.
Carter, Angela. "The Lady of the House of Love." 1979.
Charnas, Suzy McKee. "Unicorn Tapestry." 1980.
Le Fanu, J. Sheridan. "Carmilla." 1872.
Leiber, Fritz. "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes." 1949.
Kipling, Rudyard. "The Vampire." 1897.
Moore, C.L. "Shambleau." 1933.
Munch, Edvard. *The Vampire*. 1893-4.
Polidori, John. "The Vampyre." 1816.
Rymer, James Malcolm. *Varney the Vampire, or, the Feast of Blood*. 1845-7.
Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. 1897.
"Dracula's Guest." 1897.
von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. "The Bride of Corinth." 1797.

Many of the stories listed above can be found in the following collection:
Ryan, Alan, ed. *The Penguin Book of Vampire Stories*. New York: Penguin, 1987.

Selected Scholarship:

Auerbach, Nina. *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
Butler, Eric. *Metamorphoses of the Vampire in Literature and Film*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010.
Dundes, Alan, ed. *The Vampire: A Casebook*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.
Gerard, Emily. *The Land Beyond the Forest: Facts, Figures and Fancies from Transylvania*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1888.
McClelland, Bruce A. *Slayers and their Vampires: A Cultural History of Killing the Undead*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006.
Miller, Elizabeth. *Dracula's Homepage*. http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~emiller/index.html.

Special Feature

The Addams Family on Broadway Buh-Da-Da-Dum (Snap Snap)

by Douglas Cohen

When I was five years old, my parents took me to see *Merlin* on Broadway. The musical relied on illusion to captivate the audience, causing horses inside oversized boxes to vanish, people to levitate; I'll never forget Merlin appearing in a small bubble that kept expanding until he was life-sized. To a wide-eyed child, it was not illusion but absolute magic, fantasy in the truest sense of the word. Other than cartoons and simple bedtime stories, it was my first exposure to this genre. It also represented my introduction to theatre. That these two items coincided with one another is extremely appropriate. Long before Broadway became one of the preeminent forces in theatre, the links between fantasy and live performance were well established. Obvious examples can be found in the plays of Ancient Greece, such as *Oedipus the King*, and centuries later even Shakespeare himself dabbled in fantasy, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. However, it may be surprising to learn an important aspect of Broadway's roots can also be found in the genre of fantasy.

The Black Crook is widely considered Broadway's first modern musical. First performed in 1866, we are introduced to the beautiful Amina, who is desired by the evil Count Wolfenstein. Wolfenstein attempts to win the affections of Amina for himself by giving her loved one Rodolphe into the clutches of a villainous sorcerer named Hertzog, who extends his life by delivering to Zamiel the Arch Fiend the soul of one innocent each year. During the course of this five-and-a-half-hour production, Rodolphe saves the Fairy Queen, who happens to be masquerading as a dove. The Queen in turn saves Rodolphe by bringing him to fairyland and then helping reunite him with Amina. From here, confrontations between the Fairy Queen's armies and those of the Count Wolfenstein ensue. Wolfenstein is defeated, of course, and the diabolical Hertzog ends up being dragged into hell, paving the way for the requisite happy ending.

(l-r) Nathan Lane and Bebe Neuwirth in THE ADDAMS FAMILY. Photo: Joan Marcus

By today's standards, this ranks among the more clichéd fantasy stories one can imagine. Given this—not to mention the musical's obscene running time—we can safely assume *The Black Crook* will not be appearing on any producer's revival wish list anytime soon. Regardless, there is no denying Broadway's first modern musical was a fantasy. It was also a huge success, setting what was then a New York City record of 474 theatrical performances. If this seems puzzling, don't forget this was the first modern musical. It was new and fresh and different, even though it sounds contrived and hackneyed and bloated.

Since then, Broadway and the genre of fantasy have both made significant strides. Along the way, numerous other shows steeped in fantasy have appeared on Broadway. Today, quite a number of fantasy musicals are running in New York City's Theatre District: *Wicked, Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark, Mary Poppins, The Lion King*, and *Wonderland* all fall under the umbrella of fantasy.

For this special dark fantasy issue, let's narrow the focus to the darker offerings found in this vein. If nothing else, dark fantasy illustrates the extremes that can be found on Broadway. On one end of the spectrum, there is *Carrie: The Musical*, based on the Stephen King novel, *Carrie*. Considered one of the greatest flops in Broadway's history, this musical even inspired a book: *Not Since Carrie: Forty Years of Broadway Musical Flops* by Ken Mandelbaum. But pendulums swing both ways—look no further than the current musical, *The Phantom of the Opera*. This love story is based on Gaston Leroux's gothic horror novel, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (or, *The Phantom of the Opera*), and it's become the longest-running and most commercially successful show in Broadway's history.

One other dark fantasy worth noting from Broadway's history is the play, *Dracula*. First staged in America in 1927 and based on Bram Stoker's novel of the same name, the role of Dracula was played by Bela Lugosi. The show had previously been staged in London, but revisions were made to the script when it was brought to America. One of the most significant changes was a remaking of *Dracula*, turning the now iconic vampire into a sex symbol. The Broadway conversion proved so successful that Lugosi re-

prised his role in the 1931 film from Universal Pictures, also called *Dracula*. It should be noted the romanticized vampire was not an original concept at this point (see our current Folkroots article for further elaboration on this topic), but the 1931 film brought the vampire sex symbol to a mainstream audience. In fact, it was so successful, besides its key role in creating today's modern vampire craze, it also spawned an entire line of monster movies from Universal Studios in the ensuing years.

Perhaps just as interesting is that fifty years after *Dracula* found its way to Broadway and created these cultural waves, history repeated itself when *Dracula* returned to the stage in 1977 as a revival. This time the title role was played by Frank Langella, and once again the actor's portrayal as the romanticized vampire created such a stir that in 1979 Langella reprised his role when Universal Pictures released a remake of the movie *Dracula*. As to the *Dracula* play, it experienced its most recent revival this past January in an Off Broadway production at the Little Shubert Theatre, but this time it closed four days into a planned three-month run. It would seem Universal Studios must wait a while longer before the theatre delivers them another undead heartthrob.

So whether it's failures of epic proportions, unparalleled successes, or contributions to pop culture, dark fantasy on Broadway has certainly had its say. In this issue, we'll be covering the most recent dark fantasy to hit the Theatre District, *The Addams Family* comedy musical. While not quite as old as Broadway, the Addams Family has its own venerable history that deserves some discussion. The Addams Family was created by American cartoonist Charles Addams. Their first appearance came in The New Yorker back in 1938 as a one-panel cartoon. Charles Addams would continue illustrating the Addams Family in such cartoons another fifty years, until his death in 1988.

They say timing is everything. If so, Addams picked an interesting time to create America's favorite ghoulish family. In 1938, America was still in the throes of the Great Depression. Laughs were in short supply and many average American families were struggling to make ends meet. Enter the Addams Family, a clan of wealthy and eccentric folk who took delight in all things macabre and unnatural. Addams's cartoons relied heavily on satire and dark comedy, and given the country's mood at the time, it was an inspired choice.

However, Charles Addams tapped into something much deeper than this because long after the Great Depression ended, the Addams Family continued to thrive. Perhaps it's thanks to the offbeat supernatural elements pervading their lives. It could have been Addams's gift for turning the dark and disturbed into the hilarious. Or maybe it's the family's charming naiveté concerning their bizarre behavior. Whatever the reason, over seventy years later there is no disputing the Addams Family has achieved iconic status.

(L-r: Asuan Kleger, Jackie Hoffman, Bebe Neuwirth, Nathan Lane, Kevin Chamberlin, Krysta Rodriguez and Zachary James in THE ADDAMS FAMILY. Photo: Joan Marcus

In 1964, a much wider audience became exposed to the Addams Family when they made the leap to television with their own sitcom on ABC. It was during the theme song to this sitcom that those classic notes so often associated with the Addams Family—buh-da-da-dum (snap snap)—were first introduced. It was also for this sitcom that Charles Addams finally gave his morbid but beloved characters their names. In the first episode, we meet the husband and wife team of Gomez and Morticia, their two children Pugsley and Wednesday, Uncle Fester, Grandmama, the shambling butler Lurch, and Thing, a disembodied hand with a gift for appearing from holes and cracks and so on. Pets and extended family would be added as time went on, some from the original comic. In the ensuing years the Addams Family would appear in cartoons, two feature films, a second sitcom in the 1990s, video games, and the bestselling pinball game of all time.

And now they've come to Broadway. *The Addams Family* opened to previews in the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre on March 8, 2010, with an official opening night one month later on April 8. The musical runs two-and-a-half hours, with its book by Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice (co-writers of the Broadway hit, *Jersey Boys*), and music and lyrics by Tony and Grammy Award nominee Andrew Lippa. Following a darkly humorous announcement over the PA system that sets the mood for what is to come, the show begins as fans of the Addams Family would hope and expect, opening with those classic notes: buh-da-da-dum (snap snap). This leads into the overture, followed by Thing's hand appearing through the curtains, beckoning to the audience.

When the curtains come up, we find the Addams Family clan in the family graveyard, engaging through song in the yearly ritual of celebrating the memory of their ancestors. The

Ancestors take part in this celebration as ghosts, and reappear throughout the musical as the chorus. As the Addamses delight in the supernatural, they are not just aware of the Ancestors but interact with them during various points in the show. The character with the most obvious connection to them is Uncle Fester (Kevin Chamberlin of *Chicago* on Broadway, *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* in film), who is not just a character in the musical but also its occasional narrator, speaking directly to the audience and sometimes employing the Ancestors to steer events in the direction that he deems for the greater good. Of course, the greater good according to an Addams makes for a mixed bag.

As is often the case when adapting one art form to another, changes are made to the source materials. Broadway is no exception, and following the conclusion of "When You're an Addams," for anyone who is a fan of the Addams Family the most obvious change becomes apparent, assuming they missed it during the opening number: Wednesday (understudy Cortney Wolfson, of the *Les Misérables* revival on Broadway), the adorable little sister of the family, is all grown up. She's met a boy, from Ohio, and is bringing him to meet the family. The Addamses are rather protective of their own and they're a seclusive bunch besides, so this news is rather difficult to digest for some of them.

Hoffman and Adam Riegler in THE ADDAMS FAMILY. Photo: Joan Marcus

Upon learning, in the song "Pulled," that this boy fills her with happiness and thoughts of butterflies and flowers, most of the family is absolutely horrified. Indeed, the news is so troubling to Gomez (Nathan Lane of *Guys and Dolls* on Broadway, The *Birdcage* in film) and Morticia (Bebe Neuwirth of *A Chorus Line* on Broadway, *Cheers* on TV) that they can't help but wonder in their duet, "Where Did We Go Wrong?"

While this new interpretation of Wednesday represents a sharp left turn to hardcore fans, they'll be relieved to know that quite a number of the other characters will invoke memories of the Addams Family as they remember them. The casting of Lane and Neuwirth in particular are spot on—a good thing too, considering they're the anchors of the show. Reinventing Wednesday was a conscious choice, but casting Nathan Lane as Gomez Addams marks an equally conscious one. His considerable star appeal on Broadway aside, Nathan Lane's build and appearance are far more in keeping with Charles Addams's original cartoon depictions of Gomez as opposed to the casting of John Astin in this role in the 1960's sitcom. This said, Lane's last performance in *The Addams Family* (along with a number of other original cast members, though Neuwirth is staying on) is on March 6, which will have passed by the time this article reaches readers, so hopefully replacement Roger Rees can handle filling Lane's shoes.

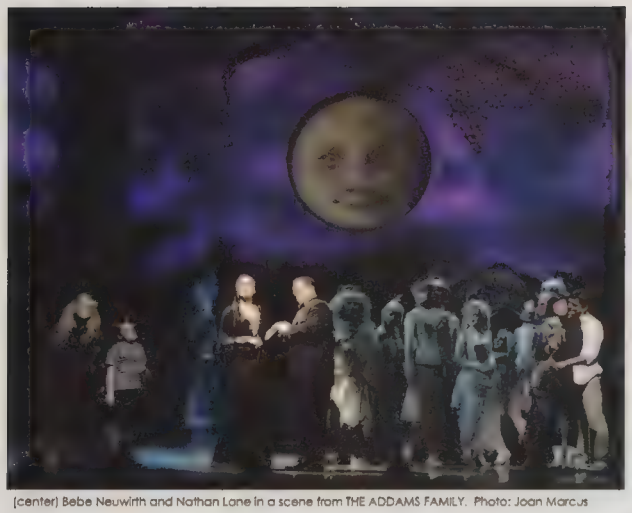
The Addams Family musical also introduces some original characters. After Wednesday further horrifies her family by beseeching them for "One Normal Night" before they reluctantly relent (to mixed results), we're soon reminded that few people from any background consider their family normal, when the song is continued by Wednesday's sweetheart, Lucas Beineke (Wesley Taylor, *Rock of Ages* on Broadway), as he implores his parents on the way to the Addams's home for the very same thing.

When we meet them, the Beinekes are depicted as a Midwestern family with traditional values. Mal Beineke (Terrence Mann of *Les Misérables* and *Cats* on Broadway) is the lone breadwinner and expects Lucas to take over the family business one day. Alice Beineke (Carolee Carmello of *Mamma Mia!* and *Urinetown* on Broadway) is a homemaker with a disposition so sunny and a dress so yellow they border on blinding, making for a nice foil to Morticia.

It all seems straightforward enough...except Mal is an unusual name for someone so traditional. Mel would seem like the better and more appropriate fit. But when put together, the first letters from each of the three Beinekes' names combine to spell out MAL, an obvious allusion to the fact that Mal is the unquestioned head of the household. Tailoring the allusion to create MEL certainly seems like a viable alternative, but during the course of the musical, Alice's name is used as the punch-line in a number of literary and pop culture references. If this literary hand-waving feels somewhat heavy-handed, the good news is the Alice jokes themselves turn out to be rather funny, as do many others in this lighthearted musical.

During their introduction, the Beinekes are lost in New York City's Central Park, searching for the Addams's home. Putting the Addams Family in Central Park is another twist original to this musical, and soon after the Beinekes reach the shambling gothic home, one of the main reasons behind some of the biggest deviations from the original Addams Family becomes clear. Oddly enough, they are an attempt to bring the musical back to its source material.

As already established, Charles Addams's



(center) Bebe Neuwirth and Nathan Lane in a scene from THE ADDAMS FAMILY. Photo: Joan Marcus

original illustrations of the Addams Family relied on dark comedy and satire. Dark comedy in a show such as *The Addams Family* is like shooting fish in a barrel. The weird, the bizarre, and the disturbed are the very meat and wine of the life of any self-respecting Addams. But finding a means to convey the satire in a musical tailored around these well-established characters represents a more unique challenge. The answer the musical's creative team settled on is to make modern Midwestern values collide with those found in New York City—bring the Midwest to a city that is no doubt as stereotyped in the Midwest as the Midwest is in New York City. It leads to a number of socially satirical jokes throughout the play, the most obvious being a reference to the healthcare crisis currently pervading America. Aging Wednesday functions as the catalyst here, as her unlikely romance with Lucas provides an excuse to bring these two families together in a situation further tailored toward comedic results.

Yet while the addition of the Beinekes and the change in Wednesday's character have been made with the idea of hearkening back to the comedic source materials, the musical simultaneously executes an inversion of another traditional aspect of Addams Family comedy. Usually the Addams Family is presented as unaware of their strangeness, which just adds to their bizarre nature. In this version, while the Beinekes certainly consider the Addamses more than passing strange, for a good portion of the musical they also view the Addamses as part of that crazy New York scene. At the same time, the Addams Family is perfectly aware of their strangeness, as evidenced by Wednesday's song, "One Normal Night," along with the family's reluctance to consent to her request. Only Grandma (Jackie Hoffman, *Xanadu* and *Hairspray* on Broadway) comes close to the Addams's usual views concerning normalcy when she says to Wednesday, "Define normal." While such changes seem unassuming, they lead to numerous jokes (and several songs) that could not take place had the creative team followed the source materials.

The end result is that the comedic elements in *The Addams Family*—unquestionably the heart of this musical—combine old elements and new into something not quite seen before with this ghoulish family. There are other reinventions too, such as changing the pet octopus Aristotle into a squid named Bernice, or making Grandma a half-insane, decrepit hippy with a flair for alchemy, and even a period where the confident and self-assured Morticia questions her own beauty.

At the end of the day they're still the Addams Family. Gomez fences with his sword and lives for his family while sporting his usual cheerful disposition, Morticia feeds her carnivorous plants, the children delight in their torture games, Lurch the butler (Zachary James, *South Pacific* and *Coram Boy* on Broadway) still reminds you of a domesticated Frankenstein monster, and Uncle Fester remains as weird as ever, even for an Addams. If you're seeking an exact replica of the Charles Addams illustrations you're bound to leave disappointed. But none of these Addams Family reincarnations are exactly like the original one-panel cartoons. Nor should anyone expect them to be. When it comes to literary icons, fans generally fall into one of two camps. The first camp hates anything not belonging to the source material. The second

(L-r) Bebe Neuwirth and Carolee Carmello in THE ADDAMS FAMILY. Photo: Joan Marcus.

camp hopes these new interpretations capture the spirit of the original creation while offering worthwhile additions to the overall lore. Such is the legacy—and the curse—of achieving iconic status. No doubt the Addams Family endures the curse part better than most.

The Lunt-Fontanne Theatre is located on 205 West 46th Street in New York City. To learn more about *The Addams Family* musical visit their website: www.theaddamsfamilymusical.com.

A WITCH'S HEART
BY RANDY HENDERSON
When children get lost
in the deep, dark woods,
sometimes the deep dark
woods get lost in them too.
ILLUSTRATION
BY THOMAS CANTY

Gretel woke to find an old woman with milky eyes and copper-brown skin looking down at her.

"You have power," the old woman said, and she sniffed at Gretel through a crooked nose. "I can smell it, oh yes."

Gretel blinked. She was not in her own bed, nor in the forest where she and her brother Hansel had been lost the day before. She lay on a mattress of bundled grasses, and was covered in yellow wool blankets that made her skin itch.

Then she remembered the wondrous events of last night, remembered finding the house of bread and cake, and the old woman inside—an old woman whose pale eyes had glowed red in the dark, the red of a witch!

Gretel scrambled back against the mud-plastered wall, and pulled the blankets up to her nose. She eyed the door to her left. The witch was old, and seemed blind. Perhaps—

"Do not try to flee, young one," the witch said, and sniffed at the air again. "You would not like the way I stop you, oh no."

Gretel wiped at sudden tears. "Where's my brother?"

"Brother-bother. He is well. I have put him out in the stable so we shall be safe, oh yes. You do not see what secrets-dirty-secrets he has in his little man's heart."

"Secrets?" Gretel asked.

"Oh yes, he is jealous of you, Gretel, jealous that your beauty makes you favored above him. Jealous because your mother loved you best before she died. And he is guilty—oh, poisonous guilty—for he knows that if it were just pretty Gretel and no Hansel then your father would not have left you in the woods to die."

"That's not true," Gretel said, yet found herself wondering if it was indeed true. Hansel had grown distant and short-tempered since Mother died. "No," she said. "My brother loves me. He said so."

"Really? Well, did your brother not promise to get you home? Did he not say it was okay to eat my house? No, do not listen to Hansel, sweet child. Listen to Granny Bab. I will show you the truth, oh yes. I will be your family and your teacher now, and I shall never abandon or mislead you like your brother or father. Rise up, my sweet blueberry muffin, and let us begin."

Gretel hesitated, but it seemed she had little choice except to obey—at least until she could find a way to escape with Hansel. She rose to trembling legs and listened as her new duties were explained to her.

* * * *

Each morning, Gretel cleaned the cottage and cooked the meals, fed the pigs and chickens, and did whatever other tasks Granny Bab set for her. The only restrictions set on her were that she was not allowed to leave sight of the cabin, or to touch the small cradle of wood and cobwebs that sat in the corner near the stone fireplace.

Nor was she allowed to visit her brother, although Hansel's occasional shouts told her that he remained alive, and the platters heaped with flatbread and eggs and berries that Granny took out to the stable always came back empty.

Gretel obeyed Granny Bab's orders at first because she was afraid of what would happen if she did not. She thought many times of running away to seek help, or sneaking out to the stable to free her brother. But there never seemed to be a good time to do so. And more, Gretel was not sure of what exactly she should do. After all, she and Hansel had been abandoned in the woods, lost and starving and afraid for their lives when they found the witch's home. That hardly seemed a situation to rush back into.

Perhaps, she told herself as she filled her empty stomach with breakfast that first morning, it was best to wait until she had some real plan, some chance to succeed.

And then, when several days passed and Granny Bab did not turn her into a toad or show any sign of feeding her or Hansel to demons, Gretel began to relax and to notice Granny's smile and words of praise more often than the way the old woman's eyes glowed red when in shadow.

In fact, Gretel enjoyed the bits of magic that Granny Bab did reveal. Granny would summon birds to repair the thatch on the roof and add bits of wattle and daub to the walls, or to fetch berries and nuts from the forest. And when Gretel did her chores well, Granny would create a brief illusion for her such as a tiny fairy or unicorn dancing on her palm. She learned that it was such illusions that had made Granny Bab's house look like bread and cake.

Whenever Gretel did pause in her chores to stare in the direction of the stable, or get a far-off look in her eyes, Granny Bab would say, "You are like a daughter dear to me, you know."

"MY BROTHER LOVES ME. HE SAID SO."

Or, "Do you like my warm house and soft bed? Do I not feed your brother well? I am so happy your father did not want you."

And always, "Tell Granny Bab that you love her."

So it was that as the weeks passed, Gretel's thoughts of Hansel, and their father, and of life beyond the cottage became fewer and fleeting.

* * * *

Each day after lunch, Gretel sat with Granny Bab and learned to read from a large black book filled with strange pictures and stranger poems.

Gretel asked about the other books that rested on the shelf, but Granny Bab shook her head. "Those are the arts of plant and stone and earth. Those are the arts of lesser witches, of weaker witches, of which witches we are not. That is the Right Hand path. Its tricky-tricks have their uses, which you will also learn. But we follow a truer path, a path of real power, the power of blood, and flesh, and dominance of mind. This is the Left Hand path, oh yes, and when you have mastered it you will be transformed into a true witch."

Gretel looked down at her feet.

"What is it, child?" asked Granny Bab.

"Da said that witches are evil, that they kill babies and dance with the devil. So did Father Schultz."

"Child, do you know your Bible stories?"

"Yes."

"Did not goodly God kill all the babes of Egypt in one single night? Did he not kill all the babies of all the world in the flood? Does he not kill children dead-and-dead-and-dead every day? But would you call God evil, bad, wickedly wicked?"

"No..."

"Of course not! And I for one do not think it very nice to go calling we witches evil, burning us, drowning us, beating us with rocks. To kill an old woman like me because I do a little magic certainly doesn't seem very fair or goodly now, does it?"

"NOW IMAGINE IF HE THOUGHT YOU WERE A WITCH!"

Gretel shook her head.

"No," Granny Bab said. "It does not. But I will tell you something your father and priest never would say. They are jealous of witches, Gretel—deeply darkly jealous because we have power beyond the power of men—and that is why they say such mean things. And Hansel will someday have the power of men too, and will fear your power. That is why I keep your brother in the stable, because if he knew how special you are, he would surely try to hurt you someday, oh yes."

"Hansel?"

"Oh yes. Do you think your father was not a boy like Hansel once? And did he not leave you in the woods to die? Now imagine if he thought you were a witch!"

Gretel imagined that very thing, and it made her scared.

Granny nodded. "And as for dancing with the devil," she said, leaning close. "The truth is there is no devil to dance with, Gretel. That which men name devil is but their own ugly little feelings, all their dirty and flirty little thoughts. Think on that, and trust old Granny Bab when she tells you that a witch is not a bad thing to be, all right my sweet?"

Gretel stared wide-eyed at Granny Bab. She watched, and waited, and when the witch was not struck by lightning she nodded and said, "All right."

* * * *

Each evening after supper, Gretel helped Granny Bab settle into a large wooden rocking chair. Granny would then rock gently and sip steaming red liquid from a silver goblet while she taught Gretel Latin.

One evening, Gretel asked Granny Bab what was in the goblet.

"It is wine," Granny replied, "spiced and hot."

"Is that what is in the barrel in the cellar, the one with all the writing on it from the black book?"

"Runes, dear heart, not writing. And no, that is just the spice in that barrel, the most precious and delicious spice of all."

"Cinnamon?"

Granny Bab laughed. "No. Even better than cinnamon. Now, back to your lessons."

* * * *

Gretel woke one morning to find Granny Bab in a strange mood. The old woman was silent throughout the day unless Gretel spoke to her, and even then responded with few words. Granny drank wine with all her meals, and had several cups in between. And on occasion, Gretel would return from a chore to find that Granny had pulled a round silver medallion out from beneath her blouse, a medallion with a bright ruby stone at its heart, twirling it between her fingers while her blood-red eyes stared unfocused into the corner of the room where the cradle sat.

Whenever Gretel asked if all was well that day, Granny Bab would smile and say, "Of course, I am just getting old. You are so good to your Granny, my sweet child."

And, "I am lucky to have such a fine daughter to protect and care for me in my old age, oh yes."

And, "Tell Granny Bab that you love her, no matter what."

Granny Bab fell asleep in her chair shortly after dinner. Gretel carefully took the goblet from Granny's twitching hand, covered her in a warm blanket, and kissed her wrinkled cheek. Then Gretel settled down to read from the black book while Granny snorted and snored and tossed in fitful dreaming.

Granny Bab began to mumble at one point, her dream spilling into the waking world. Many of the words were too low or jumbled for Gretel to understand, but they grew in volume and clarity until a few were spoken as loud and clear as the pain behind them.

"I must eat, or we both would die." Granny Bab said. And, "Forgive me."

Then Granny shouted and sat straight up, her eyes springing wide open. She blinked several times, her eyes looking in the direction of the cradle but not appearing to focus, and a blood-red tear ran down the crooked crevices of her face to form a red glyph on her copper skin.

"Granny?" Gretel asked in a soft voice.

Granny Bab's gaze drifted to Gretel and focused. Then the witch relaxed back into her chair and sighed, the pain on her face melting away as she did.

Granny Bab closed her eyes, and was soon breathing in the deep even pattern of true sleep.

* * * *

Gretel was relieved that Granny seemed her old self the next day. And in the days that followed she heard Granny laugh more times than her father had laughed in her whole life.

On the night of the third new moon after Gretel's arrival, Granny Bab handed Gretel a silver goblet filled with steaming wine.

"This is all for me?" Gretel asked.

"Yes, a delicious drink for a delicious girl. You have been working so hard, and I am so proud of you. And this is a special night, oh yes. Drink, drink, drink it all."

Gretel sipped the wine. It tasted of blackberries and cloves. It was so delicious after long weeks of broth and dried pork that Gretel did not even mind the coppery aftertaste.

"Drink it all and you will sleep deep sleep this night, the deepest of sleeps. Oh yes."

As Gretel handed the empty goblet

back to Granny Bab, she noticed a white cloth tied around Granny's wrist.

"What is that?" Gretel asked, her eyelids feeling ever so heavy.

"'Tis nothing, my sweet. I cut myself on a thorny bush while gathering berries. Now lay down. There you go."

* * * *

When Gretel awoke the next morning, she felt strange. She was unusually cold, and thirsty. Not just thirsty, but parched. Her eyes felt dry, her mouth felt dry, she half expected her skin to crinkle like dried leaves as she sat up.

"Good morning, my dear," said Granny Bab. "Drink this special treat on this special day."

"What is it?" Gretel asked, looking at the thick red liquid that filled the wooden bowl. It did not look like wine.

"It is warm, and delicious as any bacon or blood pudding. 'Tis pig's blood, poured red and ready to drink. Drink it all and you will feel much better, I promise."

Gretel took the bowl hesitantly, but as the smell of the blood reached her she felt dizzy with the urge to drink it. She needed no further encouragement, and drank it all down, carefully catching the drips with her hand and then licking it clean.

"Very good," Granny Bab said with a smile. "Oh yes."

* * * *

Gretel received more wine each night, and in the morning a bowl of pig's blood. One day, as Gretel was feeding the pigs, it occurred to her that there was still the same number as had always been. No pig had been butchered since Gretel had arrived. When she asked, Granny Bab told her, "I get the lovely blood from the special cask."

"Why does it not spoil?"

"The runes, my child, I filled them with power."

"Can you show me? Show me how to do magic like you do?"

Granny smiled an especially large smile, and gave Gretel a hug. "Yes, oh yes, I shall teach you the ways of power. You have asked and so I may teach, but not before you asked, oh no. Only the foundations could I teach you. Such has it always been."

* * * *

Each day after that, Gretel received patient instruction on how to find the power inside herself and pour it into the runes and poems she had memorized from the black book.

"Blood and flesh give you power," Granny Bab explained. "The runes and pictures shape the power into a spell. Think them, and the power is shaped. Write them, and the shape is held. It is shape and feeling, oh yes, feeling and power. Shape can be word, can be song, can be dance or waving wand, but we must first know what shape to make, and the runes teach us that."

Gretel's favorite spell was to make fire that burned any flesh but her own, and every day she jumped at any excuse to use it even though it was among the most difficult of the spells for her to do. When she asked Granny why this spell was so hard, Granny said, "Your affinity is not fire, my sweet."

"Effinity?"

"A-ffinity. Air is mine, oh, yes, birds and bats and blasts, these come so easily to me. And illusions, such as making my house seem covered in treats for little children to eats. But yours, I would say, is water, a most powerful witch to make, for body and blood are more water than not."

Gretel frowned at this. She remembered when the woodsman Max Sutz had been crushed and torn by a falling log, his insides all spilled out. She did not remember any water. But she did not correct Granny.

"Someday," Granny continued, "you might wish to live upon an island or swamp, or even beneath the water, where your powers will be strong and visitors few."

"Beneath it? Like a mermaid?" Gretel had always loved the tales of mermaids.

"If you wish, my dish. I will move my home next to a pond so that we may stay together always, how does that sound?"

After that, Granny rarely had to ask Gretel to bathe. Gretel would willingly fetch the water from the well to fill the small wooden tub, and would practice holding her breath under the water, playing at being a mermaid. Granny laughed to see her so eager.

As Gretel mastered each spell, Granny rewarded her with ribbons, and trinkets, and blood with her soup at lunch. And as the lessons progressed, Gretel felt her power growing. It became easier and easier to do as Granny asked. Gretel felt immense pride at Granny's praise. She had received little but suspicious or angry looks from her stepmother, and even her father had rarely said anything good except how much she resembled her mother.

Each day, Granny Bab would say, "Do not fret that it is difficult now, my sweet. Already, you are stronger than I was at your age."

"BLOOD AND FLESH GIVE YOU POWER."

Or, "You are a natural, my child. You will be so strong."

And always, "Tell Granny Bab that you love her."

And as the lessons progressed, Gretel's vision grew strange. It was as though the brighter the sunlight, the dimmer her sight became, so that she yearned for nights when everything became clearer. And even at night the world around her began to look blurry around the edges.

Yet the runes in the black book began to shine with a ruddy glow to her eyes. And her sense of smell grew quite sharp indeed. First, she could smell the wine and blood on Granny's breath from across the room. Then she could smell the food in the cellar even with the trapdoor closed. And then, whenever her chores would take her outside and the wind blew just right, she thought she could even smell the sour, meaty scent of Hansel out in the stable.

* * * *

Gretel smelled blood one crisp autumn morning while she changed

her clothes, and upon searching she found it on her undergarments.

Before Gretel's fear and confusion could gather any strength, Granny Bab froze in the midst of grinding dried bones in her great black mortar and sniffed the air.

"What's this? What's this?" Standing, Granny rushed over to Gretel, who hid the garments behind her fearing she had somehow angered Granny.

"Do not be frightened, my girl. This is a glorious day, oh yes. Today, you are a woman."

Gretel realized then what had happened. Elsa Gunter had bragged about it ceaselessly last summer. Her first flow. "But I am only twelve!"

"Even were you not filled with power, twelve is not so early for this. And the Left Hand path does many things to your body when you begin, playing merry with your moon flows. But enough woes over flows, oh yes. Here, I have a gift for you."

Granny Bab reached up and pulled out the silver medallion from where it hung beneath her blouse, pulled it over her head and held it out to Gretel. As Gretel took it, she could see now that the circle of silver around the ruby was covered in runes. She could almost understand the story they told, of moonlight reflecting on water, although it made no sense to her.

"MY MOTHER GAVE THIS TO ME WHEN I WAS BORN, AND I GAVE IT. . . I GIVE IT TO YOU."

Granny said, "My mother gave this to me when I was born, and I gave it... I give it to you. My power grows dim, but you will soon shine oh-so-bright with power now that you are a young woman, oh yes. The stone holds the twice-blessed blood of a virgin, and gives the runes power to hide you and protect you from many nasty nosy things that would sniff out your own power."

Granny Bab helped Gretel put on the amulet, pulling Gretel's long blonde hair out from beneath the silver chain and smoothing it down with gentle strokes. "Now, you are ready for your initiation. Oh yes, tonight we shall have a special meal and sing the songs of power. Would you like to know what is to be our supper on this most special of nights?"

"Yes! Oh, yes!"

"I shall cook your fat and stupid brother," the witch said, and cackled.

Gretel frowned, and her hand lowered the amulet.

"Oh, my sweet blueberry," said Granny Bab. "Do not fret so. Hansel, and all the children who come to me except you, they are just little piggies lost in the woods. If they had not found my home, then they would have ended up in the bellies of ugly hungry wolves, oh yes, for that is the way of nature is it not? But Gretel, are we not better than nasty wolves, more deserving of food?"

Gretel thought about it a second, and said, "Yes."

Granny nodded. "And if we were to set Hansel free, even if the wolves did not eat him, he would tell your father and the beastly priest about what you and I have done, and they will come and kill us out of fear, Gretel, oh yes. They will burn us, cook our flesh until there is nothing left but ash and dust. You do not want that, do you?"

"No!" Gretel said without pause.

"Good. And I cannot go on feeding piggy Hansel, and every other stray that comes along, I cannot feed piggy boys while my poor Gretel goes hungry, oh no, not with cold hungry winter coming soon. So we really have only one choice. I will cook Hansel, instead of your father cooking us, and so do unto others as they would do to us. And we shall eat Hansel instead of the wolves eating him, so that all that piggy meat does not go to waste. How does that sound?"

Gretel hesitated before answering. She felt that this was a very serious question, like when Father Schultz asked if she believed in Jesus in front of everyone in Church. And she realized that if she agreed to do this, then everything would change. She would change. She would no longer be Hansel's sister, or Gustav's daughter, or just a girl learning secrets from Granny Bab. She would be a witch, for true, just like in the stories.

She thought of Hansel, and her feelings for him. She could barely remember what he looked like any longer, but she remembered fights and bullying and jealousies. And Hansel's few kindnesses now seemed pale and self-serving compared to all the gifts that Granny Bab had given her. In fact, she had come to think of him almost as Granny's pet, locked up in the stable.

He was part of her old world. The world where her father had left her in the woods to die, and men burned women like Granny Bab.

And in that place in her heart where Gretel thought doubts and bad feelings should have been, there was only a growing desire at the thought of fresh cooked meat and warm, fresh blood.

"Yes," said Gretel at last. "I want to do it." But then she wrinkled her nose.

"What is it, muffin?" Granny asked, her tone thick with worry.

"Well, it's just—I can smell him from here. He's so dirty."

A laugh exploded from Granny, a wild cackle of relief and joy, and she hugged Gretel tight. "Oh, you are so dear sometimes. But do not worry my sweet child, oh no. Your fire will burn all that dirt away, and get rid of all that nasty hair too. And then together we shall feast on his flesh, and fill your own special cask with his blood. Oh, the power you shall gain! The flesh and blood of family is strong indeed!"

Gretel leaned into Granny's hug, filling herself with the warmth of Granny's love as the old woman spoke, and a laugh bubbled up out of her own throat. Then together they went into the cabin to prepare.

* * * *

Gretel was not allowed to eat that day, or drink anything but water. Granny Bab instructed her in the coming ritual, practiced the songs they would sing, showed her the runes that would be written upon Hansel, and explained the symbolic and real purpose of the heart-eating ritual.

Granny Bab said, "And you will be quite happy to know you get to light the fire for this feast. But it must be the hottest fire you have ever made, oh yes, a fire so hot that it causes even you

some pain, for that will be the final purification before the ritual begins."

Granny led her to the cast-iron stove, and gave her a hug.

"Now," Granny said. "Build your fire in the oven and I shall fetch supper. I shall have to persuade Hansel with honeyed words, since using my own power on him might taint him for your ritual. He will come this far just to see you, oh yes, but if he causes a fuss then it will have to be you who stops him. Are you ready for that, my sweet child?"

Gretel nodded, smiling a thank you at Granny for doing so much. Granny winked back, at the same time casting an illusion to turn her red eyes to blue. Then she left.

Gretel performed the fire spell. She fed her power into it, stoking the flames higher and higher. She was bent over before the oven, holding the door cracked open, when she heard Granny and Hansel enter behind her.

"You see, boy," said Granny. "I told you she was alive and well, oh yes. Gretel, why don't you crawl inside the oven to see if it is comfy warm, and show Hansel here it does no harm?"

"No, Gretel!" A once-familiar voice cried. "Don't do it! She is going to cook us!"

Gretel turned, readying the choking spell to silence her brother; but as she did so the medallion hanging down from her neck caught in the handle of the oven door. The chain snapped, and the medallion fell.

Gretel tried to catch the medallion, but it hit the floor and rolled in a tight circle. Gretel was dimly aware of a struggle between Granny and Hansel as she bent over to get the medallion, and hesitated, realizing she should help Granny first. She prepared to rise and face Hansel, but was knocked roughly to the ground as a body crashed over her and into the oven. Then Hansel was leaping over her and slamming shut the oven door, flipping the handle over to lock it. Gretel heard Granny Bab's voice, screaming, coming from inside.

A burst of raw, unfocused power caused the oven to leap, and the oven door rattled but did not come off. The wave of power crashed over Gretel and stunned her. Everything went dark for a moment, then returned, and her ears were ringing. Hansel was bending over her, trying to help her to her feet, and as he hauled her up she managed to grab the medallion.

She reached out with her mind and tried to douse the flames, but the ringing in her head made the spell fall apart as quickly as she formed it. She tried to pull the moisture from the air and send it into the oven, hoping her affinity for water would help her succeed, but still the power would not hold the shape she set for it.

She started to move toward the oven, to open it, but Hansel stopped her. She was but skin and bones, and he was twice her size at least. She tried to cut off his air with her power, but encountered the same problem as with the fire and water.

She started to cry.

Hansel spoke to her, touched her, but she ignored him. She had lost Granny Bab. What would she do now?

"That was clever of you," she heard Hansel saying. "How you bent down so that I could trip the witch over you and into the oven. She thought to eat us, but now she is the one cooking!"

Then it occurred to Gretel that there was still some small way to make Granny Bab's death meaningful. She could complete the ritual. Gretel began to sing the songs in a low whisper, and pictured the runes.

She was grateful when fat Hansel finally rushed from the cottage to vomit noisily outside, probably due to the rich smell of cooking flesh. The smell did not make Gretel nauseous, not even when she opened the oven door and it rushed out in a wave of moist heat, but her eyes watered at the sight of Granny dead. Rubbing away the tears, Gretel moved swiftly to wrestle Granny's body into position. The fire could not burn her, but she had to use a towel to handle the sizzling flesh. Then she carved the runes upon Granny Bab's blackened skin and cut her chest open.

When she took a bite of the heart and let the salty blood and warm power dribble down her throat, she felt walls dissolve between her and worlds unseen.

And as she was pulled back from that dream-state by the distant sound of Hansel's retching, she knew she had to leave Granny's cabin, and soon. Granny had taught her that large uses of power sometimes attracted nasty things, and Granny had released a lot of power in her death.

Going home to Father was the only option Gretel could see, at least for now. She looked around the cabin. Yes, if Hansel brought home some of Granny's treasures—those that Gretel did not hide—and if he told the story of how he killed the witch, then little attention would be put on her. She could remain in fat Hansel's shadow until it was safe to return here.

She gently laid the remains of Granny's heart back in the oven, then closed the door and willed the fire to burn away the body.

"ARE YOU READY FOR THAT, MY SWEET CHILD?"

She heard the clunking of the bucket in the well outside as Hansel fetched himself water. She would need to move quickly to hide the books and tools she wanted to keep for herself.

She started to turn from the oven, then looked back.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for all you have taught me."

And, "I will bring Hansel back, and finish the ritual you planned for me."

And finally, "I love you Granny Bab, always."

About the Author:

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The Sacrifice

by
Michelle M. Welch

A true sacrifice means giving up something precious, something dear, something irreplaceable. Nothing in this world is without cost.

Illustration by
Carol Heyer

Two youths are riding toward the hold of King Harald. This is the first time they have seen the castle, these youths—the great walls with their watchtowers and brilliant banners, the guards in their beaten metal chestplates, spears glinting in the sharpness of the sun. They have never seen the king, living in the village as they do, and it is a formidable thing to approach his hold now. They have been sent upon an errand, by an authority not the king's, to gather evidence for a trial of judgment.

The elder of the youths buries his nervousness in talk. His father once worked in the king's stables; he saddled the knights' great steeds, readying them for campaigns against rival lords. His mother had been one of the queen's handmaidens, given leave to buy the price of her indenture with her dowry, that she might marry the fine groom. "They were married at the castle gate," Anders tells his companion, "and feasted at my grandfather's house within the walls. The wedding night was spent at that very house—" and Anders lifts his eyebrows, challenging the younger boy to catch his meaning—"so you see, I have been to the castle, though I did not know it at the time."

The younger clerk, a boy of fourteen, gazes at the grass and flowers at the edge of the road. He gazes at the things that do not grow there, apple cores and discarded rags and dropped cups and knives and mateless gloves. He wonders at the detritus of passing humanity, how it changes the face of the world. He does not know why he has not noticed these things before.

"Gil, are you listening?" calls Anders. He sighs his irritation loudly. He is eighteen and has been apprentice to the judges in the village of Igh for three years. He remembers when King Harald first called to the Inns of Court for the judges to resolve a matter of dispute; the judges have been respected across four kingdoms ever since, and young men have been sent from the castles and villages to train as clerks and apprentices. Gilien is from a far eastern castle, his father a vassal to the king of Tanas. Anders thinks the boy is provincial and needs education. "Gil, do you know what else King Harald has?"

Gilien hates when Anders calls him Gil. "No," he answers wearily, not bold enough to resist. "What else does King Harald have?"

"In the innermost chambers of the keep, far below ground. Do you know?" Anders pauses to enjoy his superior knowledge. "It is a sacred chamber, where he keeps the marks of the magicians."

Does Gilien believe in the magicians? Perhaps he chews his lip, wondering if Anders is teasing him. Perhaps he trembles at the thought of such closeness to the paths of the men of magic. But he does not reply, he asks no questions, and he waits for Anders to elaborate.

"A garment worn by the magicians," breathes Anders with much gravity, his voice barely audible over the noise of the horses' hooves. He does not betray that he does not know what sort of garment. "A lock of hair, most lucky, tied with the colors of the magicians and a leaf from their sacred land. And a rune stone. Do you know the story of the rune stone?" He knows Gilien does not, not well enough. "The king came upon a man of magic in the fields of his southern marches, riding back from victory. He begged of the magician a boon, and the man of magic gave him a stone carved with a sacred symbol. What does it mean, Harald asked. That is for you to learn, the magician said. And it is that secret which has given Harald all his victories since."

Do you know the story of the rune stone?

Gilien looks down at the side of the road, where something white catches the sun. No bit of fabric or crockery could have remained white in the dust of so many travelers. It must be a bone, picked clean by carrion birds. "What did the rune say?" Gilien asks.

Anders turns in his saddle to stare at the younger apprentice. Such a question is unimaginable.

But they must fall quiet, for they are drawing near the castle walls. The portcullis is lifted with a forbidding torrent of noise, and guards issue down the drawbridge to meet the clerks. They eye the youths through the slits in their helms, and even Anders swallows hard, breathless and speechless. They might be sent back, Anders thinks. They might be pierced by the archers keeping watch on the battlements, Gilien thinks. But the guards admit them and lead them through the gates.

The outer bailey of the castle is a strange sight, a village wadded and stuffed tight within the walls below the keep. The king's vassals live here, servants and knights, their cottages cheek by jowl and their narrow lanes crowded with castle business. King Harald has just returned from campaigning in the west, where he has vanquished his enemies and added many acres of fine, fertile land, and booths and baskets are full of grains and fruits, trinkets gathered from the defeated castle, tokens of the king's victory. But over their festiveness the people wear a somber aspect, dark shawls and dark eyes, black sashes tied around their sleeves. Harald returned from his campaign to find his daughter tragically dead of a sudden illness. Her funeral procession passed only hours before the clerks arrived.

They come to a small cottage. An old man lives here, the father of one of the servants of the keep, and the old man's spinster sister, a woman who cannot hear but who speaks much. She is the one who went to the Inns to summon the judges, claiming a terrible crime had been committed. The judges sent their clerks to investigate, rather than coming themselves, as the woman might be mad.

What is it that has happened? The young clerks will have trouble discovering this. Only the deaf spinster speaks of it, loudly and repeatedly—how she woke late at night, not knowing why, but thankfully she did, for that is how she saw her nephew carrying the wretched soul. He lay it like a bundle on the floor and put

out all the torches, trying to hide his burden, but he could not quench the candle in his aunt's hand. He entreated her to silence, he threatened her to silence—a deaf woman she was, yes, but she knew the meaning of those words her nephew said to her—and he left. What he would have done, the spinster could only guess. He might have gone to get a wheelbarrow to carry the wretched thing to the river and drown her. The old spinster could not let such a thing happen; the girl had suffered enough. She went at once to Igh to summon the judges.

And where is the nephew now, the servant who carried in the victim of the supposed crime? He did not return to his father's house; he is nowhere to be found, nowhere to be questioned. The old man knows nothing. The spinster says no more than what she has already spoken in the Inns of Court: the manner of the victim's arrival and the nature of her wounds. There is no one to speak of the crime itself but the woman who is its victim.

They do not know why she has come.

The old spinster calls her Didi; no other name is given. She sits in a chair at the fire in the tiny room that the spinster has curtained off from the rest of the cottage. Her eyes are shut, her arms wrapped tightly about her, her knuckles white where they clutch an old shawl at her throat. The clerks make their way in and stand around her uncomfortably. There is little space for them, and nowhere else to sit but the spinster's bed. Gilien chokes on the lump that has risen in his throat at the sight of the bed, and he tries to will himself not to color where Anders can see him. They are utterly unprepared for this interview. They have spoken nothing of the reported crime since being assigned to investigate it; not even Anders is so bold. So they stand in silence in the presence of the broken woman. It is no loss, as the woman does not open her bruised eyes or speak from her battered mouth. She does not move in her chair or lift the shawl to expose her other, hidden wounds. These are seen only in the minds of the clerks.

What is there for them to do? With no criminal, there is no crime. This is the law of the judges—it is different from the law of kings, who mete out punishment on their enemies wherever they find them, who carry long blood oaths against those who have wronged them. In the Inns of Court, the judges hear the words of both the wronged and the one who acted against him, and they weigh their judgment against those words. A man who steals a loaf of bread because he hates the baker, the judges say, is different from the man who steals the loaf because his family is starving. The law of kings would strike both men's left thumbs off at the knuckle. But there must be two parties to speak before the judges. One who will not speak and one who has not been named cannot make a trial of justice. The clerks creep from the small room and leave King Harald's hold.

Outside, on the road back to Igh, Anders finds his voice. "How many, do you think?" he whispers, his voice taut with dreadful fascination. "How many men?"

Something catches in Gilien's throat. The thought of a woman bearing the weight of a single man is one he imagines with difficulty enough. That there could have been more is something that has never occurred to him. But Anders assures him that this must be true, repeating the testimony of the deaf woman as the judges took it: the bruises about the face that indicate violent struggle, the scratches on the arms that suggest the tearing of clothes, the other bloodied parts that speak to repeated battering. Gilien closes his eyes tight, as if he might close his ears as well, and sways in his saddle as the loss of his sight affects his balance.

But Anders does not cease his assault. "She must be with child," he says confidently. "How will they know which one is the father? She cannot even know. Certainly none of them will claim the child. We can guess," Anders tells Gilien with authority, "that we will be called to the castle again, when she's tried for strangling the child once it's born."

No such trial comes, though. They see the woman again, but not where they expect to. They are leaving the Inns of Court two days later, at the end of the evening's work, and in the shadows behind the building someone is waiting for them. They do not know why she has come. They do not ask. But though Anders runs back to summon the last old judge who remains at work, Gilien hurries to her side. He pulls off his cloak and wraps it around her shoulders, as the night is chill and she is not warmly dressed, and without looking at her, he hooks his hand into the arm slit and leads her into the street.

He keeps her close to the edge and the dark buildings, and by the time Anders returns they have vanished. The keeper of the boarding house where the clerks live does not see Gilien enter through the basement door and hide his secret burden in the deserted storerooms. It is cold there, and for a moment he is frozen with fear and shame, thinking he cannot leave her there. But he has nowhere else to hide her, and the thought of the twenty other men in the house finding her is even more terrifying to him. The woman herself says no words about the cold. Gilien does not ask. At last he leaves her, because he hears Anders calling him from without.

What is it that spurs Gilien to deceive his companion? It is his first act of independence, perhaps, the first time he manifests his own will rather than merely obeying the words of his betters. Or it may be the illicit thrill of secrecy, the constant danger of discovery, the hard-earned pride he feels when he turns away an inquisitive clerk or when his careful lie keeps the master of the house out of the storerooms. Perhaps he is moved by pity, his young heart wounded by injustice and spurred to do something—anything—to put it right. Or the reason could be nothing so clear, nothing but a faint, childish superstition that if Anders does not

see the woman, his dire prediction of her pregnancy will not come true. But of these things he does not speak, and his actions alone give voice to them.

And the woman's voice? Has anyone even heard it? Is she cold in her shelter, is she frightened? Does she fret like a beast in a cage, or is this place a paradise compared to what she has left? No one will know.

Time passes. Gilien goes about his work in the Inns and outside, Anders continues to chastise him about whatever he can, the woman continues to hide. The twenty other men in the boarding house do not find her, and her belly does not swell with any quickening. News comes from the castle—King Harald wages his battles, defends his territories, seizes new stretches of land. His sergeants come to the village to recruit new soldiers. Even the judges inside the Inns of Court hear the fanfares of their trumpets as the knights ride through Igh, the iron-shod hooves of their great horses clattering in the streets and making clouds of dust to choke the clerks as they try to go about their business. The clerks, watching the knights pass in their cacophony of military noises, do not speculate about why the king has sent to Igh to find soldiers among the villagers. They do not wonder whether the king has run out of vassals, his campaigns having grown so numerous—or so bloody. They watch as various merchants and cobblers and street sweepers put down their tools and take up swords; they stare at the one or two clerks who join the recruits, clasping ink-stained hands around heavy hilts and awkwardly raising the blades into the air. Anders makes words about the soldiers and their rodent-sized intellects. Gilien tries to suppress a shiver.

Then one day something is different. Gilien arrives at the storeroom to bring the woman her food—what he can sneak from the kitchens or spare from his own plate, a crust of bread and a tin cup of water—and she is gone. He looks behind the barrels and sacks, as if she could press herself flat against the walls or burrow herself into the floor. He circles the house, scratching his arms and his face as he peers through the branches of shrubs, and with fearful steps he creeps into the house, up stairs and down corridors, hovering at the doors of other clerks and listening for a female voice he has never heard.

He does not find her in the house. It is half of his world, the house. The only other place he knows is the Inns of Court, and she will not be there. Gilien feels the borders pressing on him; his world is too small. He does not know where else to look.

His heart races, he feels it pound against the too-thin skin of his throat, and his breath is short from his panicked search of the house. His stomach is lost somewhere high in his chest and it twists as if with bilious sickness. He imagines the woman, sees an image of her, alone in the night, her own stomach tumbling with hunger, her own breath short with running from faceless pursuers, her own heart pounding, spilling her blood from unseen wounds. Horror freezes Gilien. He must find her. He does not know how. He must seek help.

Only the terrible visions in his head drive him to Anders. He would not seek the older boy for anything less dire. With his throat wrapped around his thudding heart, he asks Anders in the most guarded words he can find, "What do you think happened to the woman?"

"So, it has to be outside the walls for her."

Anders, living somewhere outside the confines of Gilien's world, has nearly forgotten. "What woman?" Then his eyes widen for an instant, he draws himself up. "Oh. Well." His voice, perhaps, carries a tinge of dismay for the infanticide trial he never had the occasion to investigate. "I'm sure she's thrown herself in the river now, drowned herself for shame. That's what happens, you know," he adds, since Gilien should know. "Like the ballad of the girl from the mill."

It is not a girl from a mill in the song Gilien knows but a girl at a spinning wheel, though the endings are the same. The image in Gilien's mind changes—he sees the woman tumbling with the river's current, her skirt knotted up around her legs. He squeezes his eyes shut. "No," he says. His voice erupts tight and sharp, louder than he expects. It is louder than Anders expects. "No!"

Anders stares, falls back. Gilien has never spoken back to him. He would scold the boy, but Gilien pushes on with a great passion: "What else? What else? What might have happened?" His words make no sense to Anders but Anders cannot turn away from him, cannot pretend Gilien is merely whispering idly to himself like a child singing a riddle. Anders clears his throat, gone suddenly dry, and tries to answer. "Well, she can't have gone home to her family. Her father wouldn't want her, he wouldn't be able to marry her off. No man wants sons if he can't be certain his sons are his. Living in the castle walls, there's little enough land to be had—you wouldn't want to leave it and your house to someone else's bastard. And the castle—everyone would know by now. You wouldn't want to be the man who married..." Anders loses the momentum of his lecture. "Her."

They stare at each other, a bit pale. Anders recovers and continues. "So, it has to be outside the walls for her. We last saw her here—she might still be in Igh, or another village. She might hire herself as a washerwoman or a weaver, whatever it is she does. Unless she was a knight's daughter, then she wouldn't have been raised to work. She'd have to find someone who would marry her, not knowing who she is."

Gilien is not eased. He cannot envision the woman in a ribbon-strewn bride's dress; who would buy it for her? He can only see her clutching a shawl at her throat, the hem of a shift half covering her bare feet, shivering in her marriage bed as she awaits her husband. "What else?" he utters. "What else?"

Anders draws his brows. This spell

will last only a moment longer; then the strength of Gilien's passion will fade and Anders will be able to call him a childish fool again. But in this last moment he offers: "Or, maybe, she went with the magicians. If they would take her with them."

"They could walk her backwards," Gilien whispers. "They could make her whole again."

But she did not go with the magicians. They see her again, in the village of Igh. They see her when they least expect to.

King Harald's knights had taken their new soldiers south, and some of them begin to return. There are no parades for their return, though, no festive colors lining the streets, no trinkets or tokens or spoils for merchants to sell. These are not the castle walls that witness the coming of the soldiers. The streets of the village are unusually silent. The men who return are not the king's victors. They are the wounded, men damaged in battle, men who have gone lame of foot or whose hands can no longer grip their swords; they are men who were crippled by fear on the battlefield and could not charge, men who deserted their ranks and fled, men who are condemned by their cowardice. They come through the streets of Igh with slow steps and lowered heads, seeking no welcome for fear of seeing only scorn.

A few will try to ask them about the battles they have seen—where did they fight? How many soldiers did the enemy have and how much land did the king gain? But in the Inns such talk is discouraged. War is barbarism. Justice is the new way. The broken veterans are left to their own, and they linger in the streets, jumping at shadows.

Justice is the new way.

There is one who has come to rest near the boarding house. Gilien sees him when he rises in the morning and when he returns from his work at night. The soldier is not old, as far as Gilien can judge, but his face is so darkened by weariness and care that he seems older than Gilien's grandfather. He appears to be whole, lacking no hand or limb, but he does not walk and he does not speak. His sword lies on the ground at his feet. For hours he stares at it, lifeless in its stained sheath, never touching it. Once Gilien catches him pushing at it a little with his foot, as if at a dead snake. Gilien doubts whether the solider does anything else in all the days he sits there.

Then one morning the soldier raises his head. Not at Gilien's passing—he is looking down the road out of the village, his eyes trained on something Gilien cannot yet see. Farther down the road others have been roused by the approach of something, a sound, a movement. In time Gilien hears it, a distant rumbling he cannot name. The soldier's face resolves into some grim recognition, a joyless smile twisting his face. He still does not rise. He still does not take up the sword that lies at his feet.

"What is it?" Gilien asks, alone of the clerks who have paused on their way to the Inns of Court to wonder what sort of storm approaches in the cloudless sky.

The soldier's mouth splits like drought-ridden earth. "Southerners."

No one in the village understands him, not yet. Few have asked about the battles; few trouble themselves with the campaigns of King Harald. They do not know and do not care about the business of kingdoms, their endless struggles, the constant hunger for land. Igh has its own land and Harald is the king; his father was king before him and so it has been as long as any villager can remember. Defeat does not occur to them. The violence is countless miles away. The atrocities of war and the mathematics of vengeance are unfathomable to them.

The veterans of Igh would recognize the approaching invaders; they could name them by their torn and bloody tabards, were they asked. The motionless swordsman sitting on the ground by the boarding house was at the battle where the rest of that southern company was slaughtered. The southerners are as haunted as he is, but they have revenge to stir them. They are not many; they know it would be folly to attack the castle, but if they attack its village and kill but one of the northern enemies, one of his neighbors or kin, it will be enough for them. And the villagers are unarmed and undefended.

Farther down the road there are screams. Someone has fallen. The clerks lingering near the house stare, silent, their mouths fixed open in horror. They have begun to work out what is happening. The southerners approach, surging forward like a storm-swollen river. The clerks can see their swords now, the blur of them resolving into sharpness. They are close enough that their faces would be visible if they were not concealed by battered helms, so that they seem to have no faces at all, nightmare creatures growling their inhuman battle cry. Some of the clerks run for shelter. Others can do nothing but stare. The soldier on the ground only sits there, his shoulders jolting slightly with some bitter laughter.

Then the sword at his feet is grasped, torn from its sheath. The soldier looks up to see who has taken it. Gilien looks up as well. He must see it through the soldier's eyes, because he cannot believe it through his own. It is his charge, the woman called Didi.

She drops the sheath, clasping her hand around the hilt to test its grip, raising it and swinging it to judge its balance. She knows the sequence, this routine of motions, better than the soldier does. He learned to hold a sword within the last season. She moves as if she has known it all her life. The soldier thinks of his drills with Harald's knights, he and his fellow recruits creasing their faces as they tried to master the unfamiliar movements, while the faces of the knights were calm and smooth, their thoughts on other things. What does this woman think of, the soldier wonders, but the stillness of her face

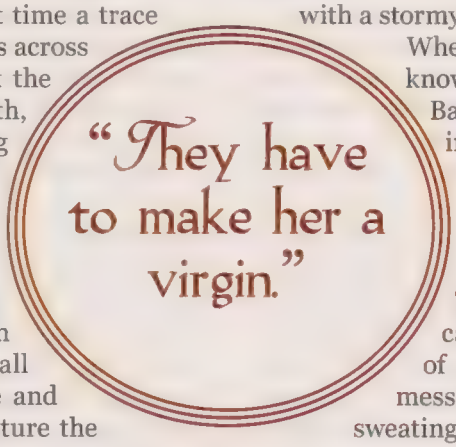
is not calm. Gilien sees it as well, and goes cold to see it. The woman's face is completely without fear, without even the tautness of determination. It is completely empty.

She steps into the street where the southerners approach. Villagers scatter in the dust of their charge, and the woman stands still. In the diminishing distance Gilien can see the glint of an eye through the slit in a helm. The woman takes half a step to the side, steadying herself on the ground, and with both hands on the hilt she raises the sword over her right shoulder.

Gilien will remember the first one going down, the crack of the impact of the sword on his shoulder, the wave of blood flowing from the unprotected gap between the neck of his chestplate and his helm. After that, events will blur; he will lose the woman in the chaos; the crowd will swell and he will take long in recognizing the newcomers as more Igh soldiers, limping into the fray and swinging swords in single good hands. He will have a sense of the soldier on the road getting to his feet, heaving a series of ragged breaths, and darting to the aid of his fellows, but Gilien will not know where he got the weapon that appears in his hand. Dust will cloud his eyes and be long in clearing, and then the attack will be over. The southerners will lie bloody on the earth, and the damaged swordsmen of Igh will stand in a weary ring among them. In the center of the ring, holding the eyes of the soldiers and of the clerks who remained and the other villagers emerging nervously from their hiding places, stands the woman.

Spatters of blood color her face. They are the only thing that has appeared there; her expression is as remote as before the battle started. She lowers her eyes slightly as she cleans her sword, and then raises them at the approach of the judges. They come slowly from the safety of their Inns, eyes wide and voices choked as they assess the scene around them. One finally nears the woman, stepping as close as he can to the gory border of the fallen attackers. She watches him come, not ducking her head in deference to a male stranger, not even nodding to acknowledge him, but only watching him with her dark, steady eyes. When the judge finds his voice he utters the only words he can think of: "You might have been killed."

And for the first time a trace of expression inches across her face, a twist at the corner of her mouth, her eyes narrowing for an instant, and then it is gone. She speaks, the first time Gilien hears her voice and such a surprise to him that he will not recall what it sounds like and will struggle to capture the words. "But I am already dead."



Few enough words she says after this. She does not explain herself, and no one asks her to do so. After this she is called the Dead One, and the broken soldiers of Igh—themselves discarded and disgraced—begin to call themselves the followers of the Dead One. They sharpen their swords and they do not leave her side.

"They need someone to lead them," Anders says. "They're worthless without it. With someone to inspire them they'll march to hell and back."

Gilien stares at the older boy who has appeared in the street, his black clerk's jerkin stark in the lingering dust. Sun glints over Anders's shoulder and blinds Gilien; he does not know if it is a rising or setting sun. He had forgotten Anders completely.

Word does not travel as fast between the villages as it does where there is a king to dispatch messengers, but the story of the Dead One and her soldiers is soon known across four kingdoms. The men of magic are wanderers and storytellers, they say, and traveling merchants are quick to verify the tale. It is nothing you have ever seen, they say. The wicked fall at her feet. Her soldiers are tireless, without fear, without weakness. Her sword shines like the purest silver, and her very breath is so chaste it will kill all pestilence within miles. Anders laughs at that story when it circles back to him. "They have to make her chaste, you see," he instructs Gilien. "No one has ever heard of a wandering woman who wasn't a whore, so they have to make her the exact opposite. They have to make her a virgin." He is about to make another remark about the irony of it but Gilien silences him with a stormy look.

When the stories are known the pleas follow. Bandits stealing sheep in another village, riots breaking out over disputed land, a northern king begging for aid. Then there comes a call from the village of Kerr in the east, a messenger on a horse, sweating and winded. When he first arrives in Igh they think he has come to speak to the king, but he has come for the Dead One. There are raiders in Kerr; they attacked the castle of an eastern king and razed it, and they have now turned to the village.

"They have to take Kerr," Anders explains. "If they really sacked the castle and destroyed everything. They'll realize how foolish it was—they'll want spoils now, something to feed themselves, at least. Do you hear me, Gil?"

Gilien flashes him a dark look. He is saddling his horse and he turns back to the task.

"The messenger brought money, all the money the bankers had, in fact, to buy the soldiers supplies. It keeps it out of the hands of the raiders, at least. They'll need to get good horses, to get there fast enough to do any good."

Gilien puts his foot in the stirrup without asking for help. Anders hasn't noticed him get so tall, and he blinks as he watches the younger boy swing into the saddle. "I know," Gilien says, and kicks his horse forward.

It takes several moments for Anders to realize what is happening, but when he does he readies his own horse swiftly. He will not be outdone by a boy from Tanas.

The followers of the Dead One have grown in number. There were perhaps a dozen discarded soldiers from King Harald's army; now the fighters have more than doubled. Villagers who were not stirred by the bragging of

Harald's knights feel differently when they have witnessed violence within their own borders. And there are more soldiers, men not known in Igh, riding out on their own horses, encased in their own armor. These gather as the followers move eastward toward Kerr, but the first of them came as the Dead One was leaving and they came from Harald's castle. If the woman knew them she did not say it. The knights drop their heads in her presence, but the reason for their deference is not spoken. Everyone, though, grows silent when she passes, and few are so bold as to meet her eyes. When, as the soldiers are setting up camp for their night on the road, Anders turns from hobbling his horse and finds himself in the woman's path, he looks back toward the ground at once, to search for something he has not dropped.

They reach Kerr. The soldiers are speaking of strategy, and Anders relays these remarks to Gilien, though he himself has no idea what they mean. The woman rides in front, silent. She will need no strategy; the dead do not fear defeat. She will need only her sword.

What she does, what happens at the front of the line, Gilien will not know. He and Anders are in the back, and they can see only the dust of the fighting before them, faces watching through broken-shuttered windows behind them as they pass. "They should have taught us to fight," Anders breathes, but there is a tremor in his voice. Gilien doubts that Anders can imagine holding a sword, raising it, striking it at human flesh. Gilien cannot imagine himself doing so; his arms ache and shudder at the thought. It is with difficulty that he thinks of the woman, unseen at the front of the fighting, the heft of the sword in her hands, the shifting of weight and balance as she moves it, the impact as it meets armor and bone. Does it hurt her, he wonders, or does she not feel it until later? Is she fearless as the soldiers say she is, or does she tremble in the instant before striking, seeing the blade of her enemy raised above her head? Is it rage that drives her and blinds her to the fear? Or is her heart as hollow as her face was in Igh—can any heart be so hollow? Gilien cannot imagine it. He realizes he cannot imagine anything she thinks. He does not know her. He has never asked. But the dead do not speak.

The dead do not fear defeat.

The raiders, they learn when the strike is over, were ones they had fought before, a pack of mercenaries razing across the kingdoms from the south. They are happy to kill them, the soldiers will say later, though they do not celebrate. They are the followers of the Dead One, and as the villagers of Kerr emerge to witness the slaughter that has freed them, seeing the silent warriors and the woman who has led them standing in the blood, they begin to call all of the soldiers dead ones. The villagers avert their eyes as they pass, and though they give them respect as the saviors of the village, they hide their children so that the shadows of the warriors do not cross them.

One night, as they camp outside the village, Anders looks across at the faint lights of Kerr and westward to the distant horizon where Igh lies and whispers, "We should not have come."

Gilien regards him in the dimness of the firelight. Shadows flicker across his face, covering parts of it, and the patches that Gilien can see are pale and shapeless like the face of a child. Gilien tightens his hands around the staff he has found, a length of wood scarred by wear and other hands. He has become the elder.

Word comes from Doss in the north. The villagers of Kerr escort the messengers to the soldiers' camp, not drawing close enough to be sullied by the smoke of their fires. Keep the horses, they call to the soldiers. Keep the weapons. They do not want these things back, these things the village coffers were emptied for, now that they have been handled by the dead. They watch from the outskirts of Kerr until the camp is broken and the soldiers are riding northward. Gilien looks back as he rides and sees two villagers bring sticks and turn over the dirt where the soldiers were camped. They leave the sticks where they lie and brush the dust from their shoes before they step back into the streets of the village.

Doss is a city, a great ring built around the castle in the center, sprawling outward to cover the horizon as the followers of the Dead One approach. Hills rise on the eastern edge of the city, marking the border between the land of the kings and the other land. Gilien has heard of the other land; he is from an eastern castle. His father tells a story of the time when a man came over the mountains from the other land, a great bear of a man with hair as red as fire, wrapped in strange garments and armed with knife and spear. It was a strange thing, the red man coming over the mountains; it has never happened since. But Doss is at a pass in the mountains where the land is low, and Gilien can look through the pass to the other land.

He sees Anders looking as well. The messengers from Doss brought word of savage raiders from that other land, fierce red men who tear through the outskirts of the city stealing and slaughtering livestock. The soldiers whisper tales they have heard of the red men, that they will murder children and burn fields. The whispers reach the back of the line, and Anders pales as he watches the pass come into view. This is the first time he has heard such stories, Gilien thinks. His world is smaller than Gilien's.

But when the soldiers reach the city, there are no red men to be seen. Their escorts bring them to the castle walls through streets that are still full of life and commerce. The fear that shows in the eyes of the people is colored with excitement. Nothing has burned in Doss, Gilien is certain. A man in fine clothes meets the soldiers at the castle gates. They are to wait on the eastern outskirts and watch the pass, he announces, standing some distance from them so as not to take in their breath. The raiders are sure to

come again soon.

The people of Doss are curious about the newcomers. As the soldiers wait in their small camp they see townspeople drifting at the edges of the city, watching them. After another day someone approaches, and then another. They squat on their heels at the camp fires and try to draw stories out of the soldiers. When the soldiers remain strange and silent some of the townspeople leave, but others remain, hoping to see the Dead One. They linger at the fire and tell each other stories, as the soldiers have offered none, drinking their own cups of ale as the soldiers have offered no drink either. The light fades, the visitors grow loud in their cups, and their tongues grow looser. They are surrounded by armed men and they do not fear raiders. "Idiot red men," they laugh. "Steal nothing better than a few goats. Only one at a time, like children sneaking sweets from a jar."

"They've stolen nothing else?" a voice asks. It is dark and the townspeople are drunk; they do not listen carefully to the voice or try to see who has spoken.

One of the visitors is a trader and he has been across all the kingdoms, as far west as the Great River and south to the sea, and he has even seen the other side of the eastern mountains. "That's all they want!" he bellows, full of spirits and courage. "They keep goats there just for cutting their throats, bleeding them as some sacrifice to their gods. They've had a drought there all season. Those gods want them thirsty!" laughs the trader.

"They've killed all their own goats, then?" the voice says again from the shadows. "None of them were a good enough sacrifice, so they have to steal other ones?" The voice is curled with an irony that the drunk men do not understand and the soldiers turn their heads from. In a moment the speaker is gone, slipping through the darkness and away from the fire, unimpeded and unnoticed. Gilien has given her his cloak.

He has seen something, Gilien has. He has looked at her, at last, not at the scenes he has imagined in his mind, not at the myth-figure that others have made. He has looked at her and he knows he does not see her, but he realizes there is *something* there that he has not seen. What he might have guessed at, I do not know. He has never seen Harald's keep, the dwelling place of the king, the winding stairs that rise high above the earth so that the king can stand atop his highest tower and survey his fields and his vassals and the village of Igh and the borders of his kingdom, saying, *I am the lord of all I see.* He has never stood alongside the king and seen the borders of other kingdoms, never felt the prick of envy that comes when one has what you do not. He has never followed the king to the lower chambers, the secret chambers below ground where the relics lie—he cannot imagine the relics, and he sees no more than the words that Anders gave him. He cannot see the king's face as he spreads his hands over the magician's garment and the lock of hair, afraid to touch them lest they crumble and lose their magic, full of hope that their blessings will cover him and bring him victory, straining to hear the answer to the riddle that the magician's rune might someday speak. Gilien cannot imagine what moves the king's heart. I can, only because I have seen it.

I have seen the king ride out with his armies to conquer another strip of land, to widen his vision and sate his thirst. I have seen the knights return, sometimes swollen with victory and captives, sometimes thinned and broken with loss. I heard the call when raiders struck at the southern border, swift and vicious, and the king drew every man who could hold a sword to defend the south. I saw what the king did not anticipate: that his enemies would strike the keep when the soldiers were away. The king left no one but the barest of guards, his household servants, and his daughter. I saw the raiders surge into the castle walls and cut through the outer bailey. I saw the guards flood out to stop them. I saw from the upper levels those that they missed, shadows creeping into the unguarded keep. I saw them when they entered, smashing aside the servants who tried to block their way, crushing the hands of the fallen until they told where the king hid his relics. They stole into the lower chambers and none was left to stop them but a single manservant and myself, and the servant did not know the sword.

I was driven by something else, and I defeated him.

Three men there were at first. Three men were not impossible. It was surprise alone that felled the first two—it is not common for women to fight. Few enough men have put swords into the hands of their daughters; few enough would consider naming their daughters their heirs, sole child though a daughter may be. The third raider had time to steady himself as he watched his companions die, and his hatred of the king, his enemy, drove him into a fierce fury. But I was driven by something else, and I defeated him.

Then the servant appeared, peering through a slit in the wall that covered a hidden stair. More raiders were coming, eight, ten of them. The sword went heavy and dull in my hand, and the breath I had lost ran faster from me. But the servant had been to the highest tower of the keep and he saw something else. The king was returning. His soldiers would be within the gates before the sun fell, not as soon as the raiders, but soon.

"Can you hold them?" I recall the servant's words, his eyes wide and desperate through the hidden window, the coming storm of running feet, the darkness of the descending corridor that I guarded. "Can you hold them?" Eight, ten men? It was madness. No single swordsman could hold them. But one single woman could, perhaps.

I recall the servant's eyes growing ever wider with horror as I dropped my sword. I recall the ringing of it on the stone of the floor.

I do not recall other things. The number of them, eight or ten, their faces, the time that passed, when the

sun fell. I do not remember when the soldiers came. I do not remember it ending. I do not know where or when it was that I heard the king's voice, nor do I recall his exact words. He must have said it was a great tragedy that the castle was attacked. He must have said that it was a great blessing that the relics were safe. He must have said it was a great evil that so many died, his household guards, the wives and children of the absent knights, so many loyal servants. And his daughter. Aladena, his own daughter.

"No, majesty!" the manservant cried. He was holding me in his lap, his jerkin wrapped around me. I recall the vibration of his chest as he shouted.

But the king did not look to the servant or his burden, lying on the floor like so much refuse. The knights did not turn toward the sound, and quietly they shuffled together to close the gap through which the king might have seen what he did not wish to. For an instant before the view was blocked, I saw his face, dark and stricken, his eyes fixed on the wall above me. "My only child, dead," he repeated. These, the last words I hear him speak.

I heard the funeral procession pass from where I sat in the small chamber of the servant's spinster aunt. A deaf woman, she has never heard the name Aladena spoken. She says Didi because that is what she can read in the mouth that says it, and she cannot hear those who urge her not to say it at all.

And I am now dead. These memories are meaningless—the dead do not dream. They will never be heard—the dead do not speak. How much will Gilien guess at? Would he realize why I did it? Would he know the import of the sacrifice? It is not the relics that I hoped to save. I do not believe in the magicians. My father spent ten years puzzling over the rune stone and its meaning. He never solved it; he will never look far enough outside of himself to do so. If the magician who gave it to him had magic at all, it was the vision to see this. The relics are worth nothing but my father's heart. There is no sacrifice too great for this.

But there is no sacrifice that is enough, it seems. For he would not risk the same for me.

The sun rises on the camp on the eastern outskirts of Doss and finds two of its company missing. Anders is dismayed; Gilien is being disobedient. He searches all around for the boy, and finds him on the road facing west, holding his horse by the reins, watching a figure's long shadow precede him down the road. "Where are you going?" Gilien is saying.

The figure on the road does not reply, but she stops and turns. She does not raise her hand to shield her eyes though the sun is full on her face.

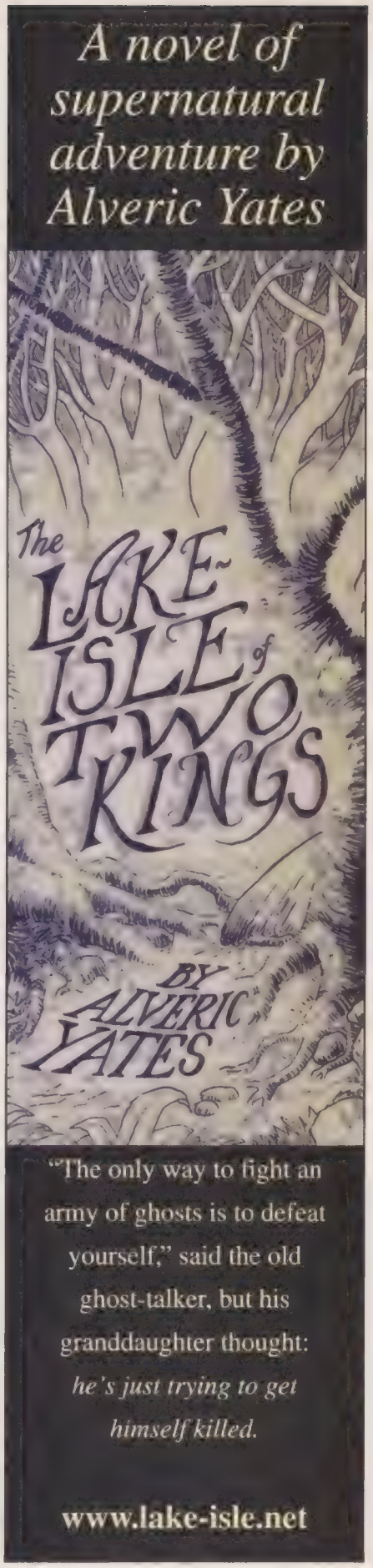
"You're not going to fight the red men?" calls Gilien.

The Dead One says, "No."

"What is she doing?" Anders whispers, believes he is whispering. The dead, of course, cannot hear. Gilien does not care to hear, either. He mounts his horse and rides forward to meet the woman. Anders watches him go, dumbstruck. His world has changed and he does not understand why. The light dims abruptly; a thick cloud has moved over the sun. Thunder cracks and Anders jumps, standing between the storm and the myth vanishing down the road.

About the Author:

Michelle M. Welch is a fan of music, libraries, history, Renaissance costumes, and dessert. She is the author of the Five Countries fantasy novels and various other speculative fiction works. She and her husband live in the Phoenix area and have reluctantly come to admit they are cat people.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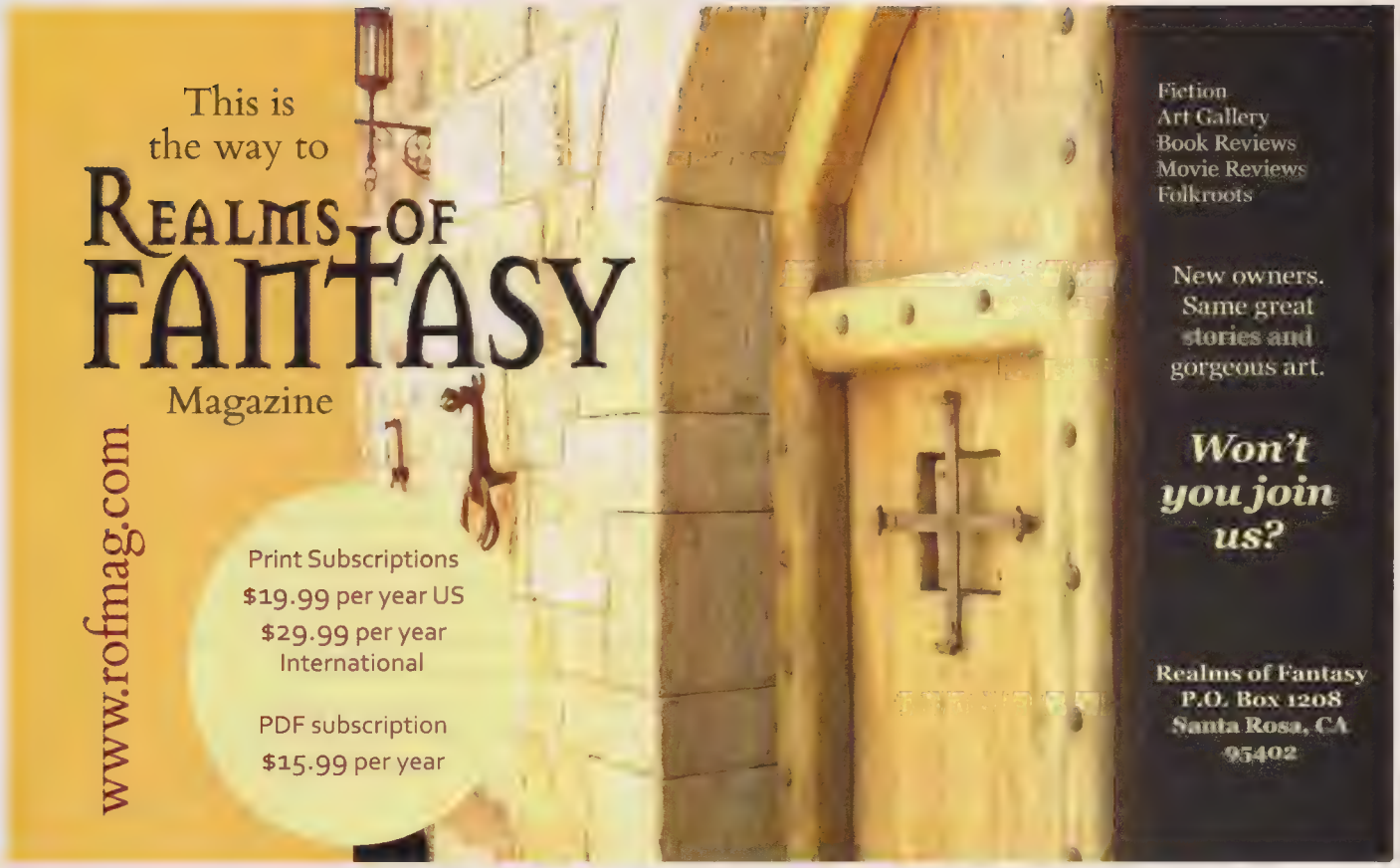

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The Weird, The Monstrous, & The Beautiful: A Q&A with Brom

by Karen Haber

In the realm of dark fantasy, Brom is legend. He's painted some of the most provocative dark images in the field and his work has inspired many other artists to push against the edges of their own creative margins.

Brom is a natural, a self-taught artist who began drawing to amuse himself and entertain friends. He says he's been obsessed with the creation of the weird, the monstrous, and the beautiful for as long as he can remember.

An Army brat, he spent his entire youth on the move living in such places as Japan, Hawaii, Germany, and Alabama. At the age of twenty, he became a commercial illustrator and within two years was producing artwork for Coca-Cola, IBM, and CNN. From there he moved into the fantasy field, dropped his first name – Gerald – and soon made his mark in every corner of the genre. In addition to painting cover art for novels, comics, and games, he has been a concept and character designer for movies, computer games, and toys. He has worked on such notable titles as *World of Warcraft, Magic: the Gathering, Diablo, Doom, Batman, Galaxy Quest*, and *Tim Burton's Sleepy Hollow*. Brom's powerful and haunting visions can be found two retrospective collections: *Darkwerks* and *Offerings*.

Not content to express himself solely with a paintbrush, Brom has moved into a new realm of darkness: writing novels that he also illustrates. His first novel *The Plucker*, contains over 100 paintings and received received a Chesley award. His second book, *The Devil's Rose*, was published to much acclaim. His most recent work of fiction, *The Child Thief*, is based upon J. M. Barrie's classic, *Peter Pan*, recast as a dark, contemporary urban tale.

Stickmen

"Writing and illustrating my own work is almost as far as you can go in an individual project and maintain control," says Brom. "I really enjoy it and it's what I've always wanted to do. Variety in subject matter and medium are what keep things interesting."

His art inspires his writing, and vice versa. "*Gunslinger* is one of my favorite paintings," he says. "It inspired *The Devil's Rose*. I did it for the *Deadlands* role-playing campaign. I love horror and historical Americana, so I was very happy to receive an assignment that combined both."

He adds, "For me, painting is all about character as I strive to create a connection with the viewer. I feel that the humanity in the subject's eyes—in contrast to the horror he has become somehow—makes him tragic and empathetic."

ROF: Is dark fantasy a safety valve, a safe place for us to indulge our darker nature? What is its appeal, and why does it stay popular?

Brom: People are fascinated by the things that disturb them. In addition there is inherent conflict in horror, and conflict always makes things interesting. The fear that something will bite you will certainly keep your attention. For me personally, it is not a conscious decision, I've just always been drawn to the dark side of things.

ROF: Dark images beautifully rendered—is that a fair description of your approach?

Brom: That is certainly what I strive for. I enjoy the contrast of the romantic, the beautiful, against the horrible, the ghastly. I feel a painting of a cadaver can be as beautiful as one of a flower depending on how it is handled, or maybe I should say a flower could be as hideous as a cadaver depending on how it is handled. That would certainly make for an interesting art exercise, regardless.

ROF: Do you have any favorite images among your paintings?

Brom: It changes with my mood. But in general my personal paintings, the ones that I self-author, are always closest to the heart. The paintings I've done for my novels, for *Plucker, Devil's Rose*, and *The Child Thief*.

ROF: Is there room for humor in dark fantasy? (I mean, aside from Jane Austen

Morgan K. Fay by Ivy Bloom

Loveless

Zombie stories...)

Brom: Most certainly. It's good to make them chuckle before you make them scream.

ROF: How do you express your own sense of humor in your work? Do people notice? (For example, *Stickmen* and *Gunslinger*) If so, what do they say? Would you like to indulge in it more in your work, both painting and writing?

Brom: I enjoy adding a touch of the absurd to both my paintings and my writing. It gives a bit more story to the piece, a touch of mystery, creates questions. For example, an axe murderer who likes to wear pink bows in his hair adds a nice "what the heck" to the whole thing.

ROF: How long have you wanted to be a writer?

Brom: I always loved telling stories with pictures or words, especially with both. As a child I loved making little books, y'know— paper, words, drawings, stapler and presto you have book! It's pretty much the same now— paper, words, paintings, computer, and presto you have book.

ROF: How did you make that desire a reality?

Brom: Stubbornness and an obsessive nature. If you wish to be a writer you have to be willing to spend a lot of time by yourself in a room. You have to be willing to fail and keep going, and going, and going. And most importantly you have to enjoy it or it will drive you crazy. And sometimes it will drive you crazy anyway.

ROF: How do you make time for both writing and art? Does one dominate? (Can you paint when you're working on a book?)

Brom: I try to create projects that involve both. I enjoy both equally. Having more than one artistic outlet helps to keep me from becoming burnt out. Under ideal conditions I like to switch back and forth every couple of months. The process seems to work best for me when I can get in a groove with one discipline and stay there for several weeks.

ROF: Which is more challenging for you?

Brom: Writing is harder because it is so much more subjective. A lot of writing can also come down to personal taste. Similar to music, people tend to like or dislike certain styles and approaches. With painting, it is very clear to me when I am doing something wrong. It doesn't mean I can always get it where I want it to be, but at least I usually know what needs to be fixed.

ROF: How does each medium feed the other? Do your paintings inspire your writing, suggest ideas to you? (If so, can you give any examples?) Conversely, how do you develop the images for characters in your books?

Brom: Often I will start with a visual image that I wish to explore and the story evolves from there. I find the two arts inspire one another. I think very visually, so even the vaguest ideas come with pictures in my mind. I will do some

Golden Helm

sketching, then some writing, back and forth, using ideas discovered in one medium to strengthen the other.

ROF: Why did you decide to retell *Peter Pan* as *The Child Thief?* Where did you get the idea? How long did it take to write it?

Brom: A couple of years back I read James Barrie's novel about the original Peter Pan, and was amazed at all the underlying darkness. Here's a quote from the novel: "The boys on the island vary, of course, in numbers, according as they get killed and so on; and when they seem to be growing up, which is against the rules, Peter thins them out; but at this time there were six of them, counting the twins as two."

Thins them out? What does that mean? Does Peter kill them, like culling a herd? Does he send them away somewhere? If so, where? Or does Peter just put them in such peril that the crop is in need of constant replenishing?

That one paragraph forever changed my perception of Peter Pan from that of a high-spirited rascal to something far more sinister. How many children had Peter stolen, how many had died, how many had been thinned out?

Peter himself said, "To die will be an awfully big adventure." Once I pondered these unsettling elements I began to wonder what this children's book would be like if the veil of Barrie's lyrical prose were peeled back, if the violence and savagery were presented in grim stark reality. How would children really react to being kidnapped and thrust into such a situation? How hard would it be for them to fall under the spell of a charismatic sociopath, to shuck off the morality of civilization and become cold-blooded killers?

The first draft took about six months. The entire book including the paintings probably took close to a year and half.

ROF: When did you paint the illustrations and cover for it, before, during or after you wrote the story?

Brom: The cover came first. It was based off a painting I had done years ago. Having that image to reference while I wrote really helped define the character. I did a bunch of concept sketches while writing the rest of it. Much like the cover, these sketches were instrumental in the development of the characters. The final paintings were done once the manuscript was fully fleshed out.

ROF: What has the reaction been to the book so far? (And what did you hope for?)

Brom: So far the book is doing really well and I am keeping my fingers crossed that people will continue to discover it. As far as expectations, going into it I knew it was impossible to please everyone, so my hopes were to convey some part of my internal emotions to those that share a like-mindedness. As a writer you are never sure if your thoughts and feelings are translating well into the written word, so it has been very gratifying to hear from so many readers that have indeed been touched in some way by this tale.

Offerings

ROF: In places it's a very dark book in which some terrible things happen to children, occasionally in graphic detail. How did you feel about that as you were writing it? Any concerns?

Brom: I didn't think about it while I was writing. I try to lose myself in the characters and trying to make each scene as true as possible. My only criteria is being as honest to each character and situation as I can. Later, after it was finished, I could look at it a bit more objectively and then, yes, I wondered if people might find it too violent. But even though it is graphic in places, I hope it does not come across as gratuitous, as my intent

was only to convey the horror and intensity that my characters were experiencing.

ROF: Have your kids read it? If so, what did they say? If not, would you recommend it for your children? For children in general?

Brom: Oh yes, my kids have read all my books. Nothing shocks them, they've grown up not only around my wacky weirdness, but also that of my artist pals. They think normal folks are the creepy ones. As for other people's children, I feel that depends on the kids, every child is different. Same applies to adults, there are plenty of adults out there that just wouldn't get it.

ROF: Are you planning a sequel?

Brom: The book was written as a stand -alone, but I do have a sequel plotted out. It was a fun world to play in, I hope to have a chance to play in it again. But at this time I am moving on to a couple of new projects.

ROF: Is there anything that you wouldn't write about, anything too horrific? (Ditto in your artwork.)

Brom: No, not if it interests me.

Untitled

Nightbell

BloodDoll

ROF: What scares you?

Brom: Everything. I am very, very superstitious and once it is dark I believe that every bad thing I have ever heard about is laying in wait to tear the flesh off my bones. I believe in every religion, I believe that all the gods and devils are out to get me.

ROF: What are you working on now, writing? And in your painting?

Brom: I have just begun a new novel, but I can't reveal anything about it yet. I can promise it will be dark and absurd. I also have a new art book in the works, but it will probably be another year or so before it is out.

ROF: Any interest in working in film, writing your own screenplays, etc.? Could you see *The Child Thief* translated to film? Or is that work better handled in the theatre of the reader's imagination?

Brom: I would love to have my novels translated into film. But the film world is a frustrating one, as you have to line up so many players to get anything done. I have had some good forward movement on a few, and have my fingers crossed that at least one of them will see the theater one day.

To see more of Brom's work, check out his website at http://www.bromart.com

Jack

Silentquin

Perth

WEIRD

Mooncurve

BROM

BEAUTIFUL

MONSTROUS

LITTLE VAMPIRES
BY
LISA GOLDSTEIN
NOT
ALL
VAMPIRES
DRINK
BLOOD
OR EVEN
SOULS
NOT ALL
VAMPIRES
ARE
MONSTERS.
THEY'RE
RATION BY
NORRBY

I COULD TELL YOU A STORY ABOUT THAT, IF YOU LIKE.

Oh, don't be so impatient. I'll answer your question, don't worry. And I do appreciate the offer, Robin—it's very sweet of you to ask me to move in with you and Neil. You're right, it is sometimes hard now that your father's gone. It does get lonely. I have the sweetest daughter, I say that to everyone if they ask about you. Sometimes even if they don't.

Anyway. What I want to tell you about happened—oh, it must have been back in the sixties. That's right—you were twenty, and Mike was nineteen. You were both in college, and I'd been working at the insurance company for a few years by then. No, don't interrupt. I know you disapproved of me going back to work—we've had this discussion a hundred times. You think it was some kind of sacrifice, that I was working just to pay for your tuition and Mike's, but the truth is that I wanted to do it. I enjoyed it.

For one thing, I made some good friends at the company. Marge, for example. Poor woman, her husband had left her a couple of years back, and we tried to keep her from moping too much. She ended up taking him back about a year later, believe it or not, though we all told her not to. And Jackie—she was married, like me, but she put her husband down something awful. We finally met him at an office party and he seemed very nice, though of course you never know.

And Irene. She was young, about the same age you were then. She wore those colorful hippie clothes, whatever she could get away with in the office, miniskirts and embroidered blouses and lots of bracelets. Her hair was long and dark and parted in the middle—she looked like an Indian, an American Indian, I mean. Native American, is that what they say now?

We loved hearing about what she got up to, she was so different from the rest of us. Parties every night, another boyfriend every week. And this was the sixties, you know, so she slept with all of them. It was all new to us—we'd grown up twenty years earlier. We tried not to look too shocked, though Marge would sit there with her mouth open. Irene took drugs, too, most likely, but I think she drew the line at telling us about that.

There were these two strange women who worked in the office with us, Vera and Anna. All we knew about them was that they were from somewhere in Eastern Europe, and they had the same last name, so we were pretty sure they were related. I don't remember what the name was now, something with a lot of s's and z's. Anna was much younger, and still good-looking—a blonde, with that hairdo a lot of people had then, a bouffant I think you call it. Hair swept up, sprayed within an inch of its life. Bright lipstick and matching fingernail polish, a different color every week. Vera had gray hair, cut short, and I don't think she used any makeup. They left the office together, right after work, in this ancient Chevy that looked like a boat.

The four of us, Jackie and Marge and Irene and me, we used to go out to dinner on Tuesday night. We'd started because Jackie and I thought Marge needed some fun in her life, but we liked it so much we ended up doing it every week.

IT DOES GET LONELY.

We'd asked Vera and Anna out to dinner a few times, but they always said no. This day I'm telling you about, Vera was in the hospital, so we asked Anna again. They were obviously very close, and we thought we'd take her mind off things. We didn't expect her to come, though, so we were all very surprised when she said yes.

It was Halloween that night. We always sat by the window of the restaurant, and that evening we could see the kids go by in their costumes, all the little pirates and princesses and vampires. We pointed out the cute ones, and we laughed at the funny ones, and Marge and Jackie and I talked about our own kids going trick-or-treating. I told them how you went out every Halloween in that ratty old cowgirl costume, how you refused to wear anything else for years, until you finally outgrew it. Yeah, you're right—I've told that story a hundred times. I still think it's cute.

We laughed a lot at those dinners. Well, we'd have a few drinks—I was always glad I took the bus home, I wasn't in any shape to drive. Don't look so shocked, you look like Marge with your mouth open like that.

Anna didn't say anything, though. She kept looking at her watch, and after we ordered she left the table to call the hospital. When she came back Marge asked her how her mother was doing.

Anna looked surprised. "Oh, she's not my mother," she said. "She's my sister."

Well, it was one of those moments where you have to rearrange everything you thought you knew. All of us had just assumed they were mother and daughter.

And what could we say? Marge said, "You look so young."

Anna said, "Vera's only ten years older."

I couldn't help it, I had to ask. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-nine."

She seemed five years younger, at least, and Vera looked like she was in her mid-fifties. We'd all wondered why Anna wasn't married, but of course I couldn't ask that. So I said, "What's Vera in the hospital for?"

"Her appendix." She pronounced it funny, the emphasis in the wrong place. Her English was very good, but every so often she'd get something wrong.

She'd never talked so much about herself—neither of them had, they kept to themselves—so I asked her where she was from. "Hungary," she said. And then our food came, and we started eating, and I lost the chance to ask her more questions.

We finished dinner and lit our cigarettes. We all smoked in those days, though by then we'd started to hear how bad it was, and we tried to get Irene to quit. And I was worried about you too, I have to say. Oh, don't look so surprised, I knew all about it.

When she finished her cigarette Anna said she had to go the hospital. "What do you mean?" Jackie said. She could be abrasive sometimes, though she meant well. "It's her appendix, it's not brain surgery. You can stay a few minutes. Anyway, she's probably still in recovery."

Anna said, "I'll go call them," and she left the table again.

When she got to the phone booth Irene said, pretty quiet, "Something strange there."

"I think it's sweet," Jackie said. "I hope someone visits me in the hospital if I have my appendix out. Sam would probably go bowling."

Marge always laughed when Jackie said things like that—I think she liked hearing how awful men were—but I felt uncomfortable. If she hated Sam that much, why didn't she leave? But of course you didn't, not in those days.

Anna came back. "You were right—Vera's sleeping," she said.

"Good," Jackie said. "This calls for a drink." She looked at Anna. "What are you having?"

She asked for wine. Well, that was another surprise—we all thought she'd stay sober, for when she went to the hospital. Our drinks came, and she said something in Hungarian, and then in English, "To your health."

Jackie tried to repeat the Hungarian, and Anna laughed, the first time we'd ever heard her laugh, I think. "You just said, to your behind. Your ass."

We all laughed then, and it looked like things were loosening up. Anna said the two phrases again, but we couldn't hear any difference.

"I have to leave pretty soon too," Irene said. "There's a Halloween party tonight."

"I don't know how you do it," I said. "Staying up all night, and then coming in to work like nothing happened."

"Oh, you did that too, when you were younger," Jackie said. "We all did."

"Why do you go out on Tuesday then?" Anna said. "If you're so tired the next day. Why not Friday?"

"I go to my mother's on Friday night," I said.

"Oh," Anna said. "You're a Jew?"

Well, I was a little taken aback. My grandparents, your great-grandparents, had to leave Russia because of anti-Semitism—I told you about that. I didn't know how Hungarians felt about Jews, but now I wondered if it might be similar.

"That's right," I said. I looked at her to see if she'd say anything else, but she didn't.

There was a sort of awkward pause then. Some more kids walked by, and we all looked out the window. It's funny to think that children those days went out trick-or-treating without their parents, just some older kids from the neighborhood. You and Mike did that, I remember, and I didn't think anything of it.

"Oh, my God," Marge said. "Look at him!"

An older kid went by, about twelve or thirteen. He looked like he had an ax stuck in his head, and blood was pouring down his face. "Why would anyone want to do that?" she said. "It's horrible."

"It's Halloween," Irene said. "You get to act out your nightmares. Whatever you're afraid of."

"And he's scared of being whacked in the head?" Jackie said.

"Well, maybe not. But death—everyone's afraid of death."

"Are you wearing a costume tonight?" Marge asked her.

"Of course. A vampire. Fangs and white makeup and a cape, the whole thing."

"Are you afraid of vampires?" Jackie asked.

"Of someone who drinks your blood? Sure. It's a frightening night, it's supposed to be frightening. We've forgotten that, with all these princesses and fairies. Halloween is when the door between life and death opens, and all the ghosts and demons come out. In Mexico, you know, they have picnics on their ancestors' graves."

"I don't even want to think about it," Marge said. I'd noticed this before, that sometimes she made an effort to ignore things. I think she thought that if everyone pretended killing and drugs and even some kinds of sex didn't exist, then no one would kill or take drugs—no one would ever come up with these ideas on their own. Of course her husband was out with a girl half his age, so I can see why she felt that way.

"But you have to," Irene said. She looked out at Marge from between those curtains of hair she had, very serious, like some kind of fortune-teller. "You have to face your demons. Otherwise they'll take you over."

"Oh, that's nonsense," Marge said. "What demons could you possibly have? You're twenty years old."

"I'll tell you what happened to me on Halloween once," Irene said. She lit another cigarette.

I thought she wanted to shock Marge out of her complacency. She had something planned, all right, but it was bigger than that. She was a very smart girl, Irene—I think we all underestimated her.

Marge and Jackie didn't realize anything was going on, though. They sat back and pushed their plates away and lit their own cigarettes, all set to hear a ghost story. Anna had no expression at all, and I wondered if she knew what was going on, if they even had Halloween in Hungary. Or maybe, I thought, she was still worrying about her sister in the hospital.

"This was when I was out trick-or-treating with my friends," she said. "We were pretty old for it, eleven I think, so it must have been 1956. We loved it, though—we loved all that stuff. We had séances at night, during sleepovers, when our parents thought we were doing homework and trying on clothes. Or we'd read *Dracula* to each other—it was our favorite book, though I don't think we understood a lot of it.

"Well, not surprisingly, everyone at school thought we were pretty freaky. Some of the kids threw things at us in the cafeteria, or called us witches. We put a spell on them, something we'd read in a book at the library, but it didn't seem to stop them.

"One of the popular girls asked me once how I thought I'd ever get married if I kept acting so weird, and I said I'd marry someone just as weird as I was. They all talked about how they were going to date football players when they were in high school and get pinned and then get engaged. I couldn't imagine anything more boring. You want to know what scares me—it's being married to a football player.

"EVERYONE'S AFRAID OF DEATH."

Don't Go to That House.

"Anyway, this night I'm telling you about, this other group of girls in our class were out trick-or-treating too. God, we hated them. They weren't the most popular kids, who mostly just ignored us, so they had to prove how different they were from us. And we kept running into them—we'd be going around a block one way and they'd be coming the other way, and of course we had to stop and yell insults at each other. We were all dressed up as witches, and they'd say something original like 'Hey, look at her, she doesn't even need a costume!' And we'd say, 'Better not laugh at witches—they'll come get you!' They just laughed, though, and we hated them even more.

"Then we turned a corner and they were there again, and this one girl said, 'Don't go to that house. Those people are weird—I mean really strange. Weirder than you.'

"I said, 'Yeah, too scary for you?' and she said, 'No, I mean it. Don't go there.'

"Well, of course we had to go. We thought they were being mean again, that that house had more candy than any of the others. Or that the people who lived there were witches—we were all dying to meet a real witch—or that the house really was haunted.

"And it did look haunted, to tell the truth. It had a wooden fence around it, tall enough so we couldn't see the house, and these brambles winding around the slats in the fence—I think they were brambles, anyway, something with wicked-looking thorns. We'd gone by it on our way to school a hundred times, and of course we'd wondered who lived there, but we never saw anyone go in or out.

"We opened the gate in the fence. It creaked, and we laughed, sort of nervously, and looked at each other to make sure we all wanted to go on. The house was wood too, with these turrets and gables and stuff. All our houses were made out of stucco, and they all looked like boxes, so we were pretty impressed.

"Only one light was shining, in a window downstairs. The path got darker and darker as we left the street, and their porch light wasn't on, but we could tell that they didn't have a pumpkin out. Our parents had warned us about that—we knew it meant they didn't want trick-or-treaters. But we couldn't turn back now.

"There was a knocker on the door. In the dim light I couldn't really tell what it was, but I thought it might have been a devil's head, with horns and a pointed beard and this huge tongue hanging out. We stood there getting our courage up, and then my best friend, Polly, lifted up the knocker and let it drop. It made this hollow thumping noise, but no one came to the door. Polly knocked again. This one girl, Sherry, said there was no one home, and we could tell she wanted to go back.

"We heard footsteps from inside. Sherry giggled, and we all told her to shut up.

"The door opened, and a man and a woman stood there. They were both dressed very formally, the man in a black suit and a bow tie, and the woman in a long off-white dress, with bows on the skirt. At first I thought they were wearing costumes. I'd never seen an adult in a Halloween costume, and I have to say I thought it was pretty cool.

"'Ah, look at all of you,' the man said. 'Do you want candy, is that it?'

"We nodded, and Polly and I managed a belated 'Trick or treat!'

"'Let me see what I have,' he said, and he headed back into the house. The woman's eyes followed after him, and then she turned back toward us.

"There were no lights on in the room, just a candle on a table. I could see that the candle was white, and that it had burned pretty far down, but I couldn't really make out anything beyond that. I could hear something, though, a kind of buzzing. After a while I figured out what it was—flies, buzzing somewhere inside the house."

"And did you hear organ music too?" Jackie asked.

"What?" Irene said. She looked surprised, startled out of the flow of the story.

"Organ music," Jackie said again. "My kids used to watch those movies too."

Marge laughed. She looked relieved at the interruption. She picked up her cigarette, knocked the ash off, and brought it up to her lips.

"I wouldn't let my kids watch them," she said, blowing smoke out of her mouth. "Gave them nightmares. Of course they'd sneak out to the theater as soon as my back was turned."

"Oh, be quiet," I said. I wanted to hear the rest of the story. And unlike Jackie, I half-believed it. I still do. "So you were standing at the doorway with this strange woman."

"Strange woman, yes," Jackie said. "You forgot the dusty chandelier. And the bats."

"There was only this one candle, like I said," Irene said. "After a while, though, my eyes adjusted, and I noticed that the woman looked pretty strange. She was very pale, for one thing, paler than her dress, so white I wondered if she'd put on makeup. And thin, too—her arms were as thin as my younger sister's.

"None of us said anything. It was quiet—all I could hear was the flies buzzing around. The woman just stood there, like a mannequin, like a spark had gone out of her. And every so often she'd look back into the house again, and I thought she was waiting for the man to come back.

"I was starting to look too, trying to see past her and into the room, but it was too dark. I don't know how to explain it, but there was something compelling about the man, something I barely understood. I understand it better now—I've seen people who are strong like that, who use their power to control others.

"Polly was very good at talking to adults—somehow she was more at home with them than we were, more than most kids her age. 'This is a wonderful house,' she said.

"It was, too. Even in the dim light we could see that that front room was huge. It had a dark wooden floor and big blocky furniture, and there was a beamed ceiling far overhead.

"'Thank you,' the woman said.

"'How long have you and your hus-

band lived here?' Polly said.

"'Oh, he's not my husband,' the woman said. We must have looked shocked—we didn't know anyone then who lived together without being married, that's how innocent we were—and she said, 'I'm—I suppose you'd say I'm his servant.'

"That was another strange thing, because if she was a servant she was a really bad one. By then I'd noticed that there were clumps of dust on the floor, and that her dress was pretty dirty. It wasn't off-white like I'd thought, it just hadn't been washed.

"Polly kept on, though—I told you she was good at conversation. "'This must be a hard house to keep clean,' she said.

"'Oh, I don't mind,' the woman said. She seemed a little drowsy now—stoned, I'd say now. 'He's a wonderful man, a great man. He's seen so many things, and he knows so much... I'd do anything for him, anything at all.

"'Do you see that candle over there?' she said, pointing to the table. She slurred over the words. 'That's my life, my life in his keeping. When it comes to an end then so will I. He'll be finished with me then. He'll have used me up.'

"I looked at the candle again. It was nearly gone. It sputtered once as we watched, and gray smoke rose up into the air. And I noticed other candlesticks then, silver ones, empty but with beads of white wax down their sides, each of them burned down. Each a person whose life he'd taken.

"Then suddenly the man was there again, though I hadn't seen him come back. 'Why don't you come inside?' he said. 'I could show you the house.' But he wasn't holding any candy—he was holding a silver candlestick, with a white candle.

"And I wanted to, that was the terrifying thing. I even started to move, I stepped toward the doorway. It seemed normal—more than that, it seemed inevitable. To get away from my boring life, stop going to school, stop worrying about my grades and the other students who laughed at me, to have a focus, a purpose...

"All the while, though, this small voice was screaming inside my head, telling me to stop, to run away and never come back. That he would use me up, take everything I had until I guttered and burned out. But even that didn't seem so terrible. What did I have, compared to this? This was my last chance—I'd never feel anything so exciting again.

"The woman was beckoning to me too. She smiled, and I saw how pale she was, how weak, and I shivered.

"I walked a little ways into the room. The woman smiled some more, so much I could see her teeth. Then I ran for the table and shoved it over. All the candlesticks fell, they clattered as they hit the floor. I didn't see what happened to the burning one, whether it went out or stayed lit or even set the floor on fire.

"The man lunged toward me, but I slipped past him and ran out the door. We were all running then, and screaming, and from inside we heard the woman screaming as well."

Irene stopped. The rest of us sat silent. We'd forgotten our cigarettes—they lay on our plates, burning out unnoticed. "That's why I'm wearing a vampire costume," Irene said. "I've worn one every Halloween since then."

Marge was the first of us to break free. "Oh, come on," she said. "You can't expect us to believe that. It's like Jackie said—you've seen too many movies."

Irene looked out at her with her fortuneteller's expression. "I don't expect you to believe anything," she said. She brushed her hair behind her ears, her bracelets jangling. "It is true, though."

"All right, then what happened after that?" Marge asked. "Did you go to the police?"

I didn't hear her answer, if she gave any. I noticed Anna then. She was crying, very quiet, tears running down her face, her mascara all smeared.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"It isn't nothing. There's something wrong. Is it—do you want to tell us about it?"

She just shook her head again.

"Is it Vera?" Jackie asked.

"No. Yes." She was silent a minute, and we all waited for her. Then she said, "I have to tell it like a story. Like you did."

She took a deep breath, wiped her mascara. She stubbed out her cigarette, though it had long since gone out, stalling for time.

WHEN IT COMES TO AN END THEN SO WILL I.

"Vera and I, we lived in a small town in Hungary," Anna said finally. "She was ten years older, like I said, and when we were growing up I thought she was the most beautiful person in the world." Anna must have seen our expressions, because she nodded emphatically. "Oh, yes, she was. You should have seen her then. All the boys came over to our house, just to talk to her. Just to be in the same room with her.

"I wanted to be exactly like her, even when I was six and she was sixteen. I tried on her clothes and her makeup, I followed her wherever she went. I even followed her to the movies when she went out on dates—poor Vera, she was so embarrassed.

"Then the Germans invaded Hungary. We'd been lucky for a while—it was already 1944 when they came. But we were worried, you know, because we'd heard they were doing terrible things to Jews."

I must have looked surprised, because she said, "We were Jewish, I thought I told you. Well, maybe I didn't. We learned how to be secret, Vera and me.

"I was sixteen by then. There was a girl on our street, a Christian, and somehow she'd gotten two—how do you say it?—two identification cards. And she said she'd give the second one to us.

"Well, that was very good, but it was also terrible. One of us would be safe, and the other—well, we didn't know what the Germans were doing, but we knew that they had taken away Jews in other countries. They were taking them to labor camps, that's what the Germans said.

"And then Vera said, suddenly, before we'd really had a chance to dis-

cuss it, 'You take it—you're younger than I am.' And I did, I took it.

"I had to go away, of course, because everyone in our town knew who I was. I went to Budapest. I left Vera and our parents, and when I left I didn't know if I'd ever see them again.

"So there I was, alone in a big city, without my family for the first time in my life. I had to pretend I was older, nineteen or twenty. The identification card said twenty-one, but no one ever looked much at the date you were born, just the religion. I got a job in an office, like here. I didn't talk very much to anyone, in case I made a mistake."

She lit another cigarette. "You know, you think you're just taking on a different name, but you become a different person. I had to go to church, become a Catholic, because that's what it said on the card, and people would wonder if I didn't. Even the name seemed to change me, make me into someone else. Ildiko, that was the name. It wasn't a name Jews used much.

"And then the war ended. The survivors from the concentration camps started coming back, and we found out how terrible it was, much worse than we had ever guessed. So many people had died. And the others—they were so thin, I'd never known people could get that thin. They seemed to eat all the time. And they were sick, a lot of them, with typhus and jaundice and even worse things.

"The Red Cross put out lists of those who had survived, and I'd go look for Vera and our parents every day, but I never found them. But then one day I met a woman from our town, Eva, and she said she'd seen Vera in the camps, and she thought she was still alive. Our parents had died, she said, the Germans had killed a lot of the old people.

"Eva was going back to our town, and she said that Vera would probably go there too, so I went with her. We had to wait a long time for a train. It seemed like all the world was traveling then, going home, and a lot of Jews were trying to leave Hungary.

"That was the first time I saw what people would think of me. Eva tried to hide it, but I could tell she resented me because I hadn't been in the camps, even hated me. And I wondered what Vera would think. I dreaded it, because she had kept me safe, she had made the sacrifice for me.

"Eva was right, Vera had gone to our town. I saw her in the street almost as soon as I got there. I ran to her and put my arms around her. We fell on each other's neck, we say in Hungarian. She was so thin—when I hugged her my hands almost reached my elbows. I couldn't think of anything to say—I just said, 'Oh, Vera, oh, Vera,' over and over again.

"She didn't say anything for a while. And then she put her mouth up against my ear and she said, 'I took care of you, and now it's your turn. Now you have to take care of me.'"

Anna stopped then. And we didn't say anything either, thinking about what we had heard. Finally Irene said, "But she didn't mean it like that. Not for your whole life."

"It's very hard for her here," Anna said. "She never really got used to this country. And I'm the only one she has left."

"But what about you? You don't owe her this much. She's using you, she's ripped off your entire life."

"I used her too," Anna said. "I told myself I didn't know what would happen, but I knew something, I knew it would be bad. And I took the card anyway."

I'D DO ANYTHING FOR HER.

"But you could still go out, you could date—" I said.

"You don't understand," Anna said. "I love her. I'd do anything for her, anything at all."

She wouldn't say more, and we didn't press her. We couldn't.

What happened after that dinner? Very little, really. Vera and Anna still didn't talk to us much, they kept mostly to themselves. I watched them sometimes, now that I knew their story, and I could see that what went on between them was more complicated than I'd realized. Anna was right, I couldn't understand, not really. My strongest memory is of them walking out to that old car of theirs in the rain, one umbrella between them, leaning close to each other and laughing.

Marge took her husband back—I told you about that. She left the company around then, and I quit a few years later.

Why did I quit? Yes, I did say I enjoyed working, but I'd gotten tired of it by then. All right, all right, you don't have to yell at me. You were right—I was working to pay for your college. There, are you happy? Why do you have to make such a big deal out of it?

No, of course not, don't be ridiculous. Of course I'm not calling you a vampire. That's not what I meant at all.

The thing is, giving and taking—it's not all one way. You were such an easy child, a sweet child—you hardly ever asked for anything. You didn't even want a new Halloween costume, for heaven's sake. Other kids wanted every toy they saw, or every piece of clothing, but you never did.

It was all on my side. I loved you that much. I couldn't refuse you, ever. I gave you things you never even asked for.

And that's why I can't move in with you. I'd just start all over again, I wouldn't be able to help it. But it's not the same now. You're not the child anymore, and I'm not the mother, not in the same way. It wouldn't work. Because I'd do anything for you, anything at all.

About the Author:
Lisa Goldstein has published nine novels and dozens of short stories, many of which appeared in her collection *Travellers in Magic*. Her novel *The Red Magician* won the American Book Award for Best Paperback, and her novels and short stories have been finalists for the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards. She has also published two fantasy novels under the name Isabel Glass. She lives with her husband in Oakland, California, and has worked as a proofreader, library aide, bookseller, and reviewer. Her novel, *The Uncertain Places*, will be published in June by Tachyon Publications. Her web site is www.brazenhussies.net/goldstein, and she does occasional blogging at http://community.livejournal.com/theinferior4.

By Shackle and Lash

by Euan Harvey

What lives in the underworld? Demons, certainly, but perhaps an incorruptible beauty.

Illustration by
Cyril Van Der Haegen

"You ran."

Mushaf's eyes were cold, his face hard.

"We would have died!" Kemal blustered. Sweat shone on his skin; he stank of it, sour and rancid. Wahid glanced at him in distaste.

"You ran," Mushaf repeated. Behind him, the other four Mukhabarat captains stood with their arms folded.

"It was a Hand!" Kemal gestured furiously, and sweat flicked from the ends of his fingers to land on the polished rosewood of the table. "You saw what he did!"

Mushaf looked at the droplets of sweat, then back at Kemal. "You ran."

"We are not asshuri," Wahid hissed. "What did you expect us to do?"

"True!" Kemal chimed in, nodding vigorously. "We are of the Mukhabarat. We are not common soldiers!"

"You ran." Mushaf's voice was relentless.

"What of it?" Wahid demanded, suddenly furious. "Gamal himself, he—" Wahid stopped himself just in time. There was a dangerous glitter in Mushaf's eyes.

A thick silence descended.

Wahid swallowed. It was true! Gamal had run also—not that it had saved him. Gamal had been doing the Shah's work, culling traitors and keeping the city safe. But he'd drawn the Hand's attention—and Wahid had *said* it was foolish! What kind of man toyed with the Hands of Afaz? A fool! But Gamal had laughed, said Mu'Tasim—the Voice of Afaz—came to heel when the Shah called him, and that Gamal would do the same to the Hand, that Farid i Hudhayfah. Only when the Hand came, he came armored and singing the paean. And after killing four men at the palace gates—where Wahid and Kemal both ran—the Hand had faced down an entire asshuri phalanx, threatened Ma'Sama Qudumah, the Shah's cousin, and then pursued Gamal the entire length of the palace to the Sky Garden, where the Hand had finally killed him.

But though it was true Gamal had run, it was also true that Mushaf had revered Gamal. Telling Mushaf that Gamal had run would be...unwise. Mushaf was not a forgiving man.

So Wahid looked away, and said nothing.

"You are not fit to remain in the Mukhabarat." Mushaf tossed Wahid's seal onto the table. The glazed pottery medallion spun to a halt with the seal uppermost: the stooping hawk of the Mukhabarat under the winged sun of the Line of Sayun. "We need hawks." Mushaf tapped the seal with his finger. "Not jackals."

Wahid didn't look up; he stared at the seal on the table with anger throttling him. Mushaf hadn't been there. He didn't know. And it had been a *Hand of Afaz!*

Mushaf leaned back, looked at Kemal. "Your seal."

"You can't!" Kemal protested. He leaned forward, gripped the edge of the table. "We are Mukhabarat! We serve the Shah!"

Mushaf stared at Kemal's fingers. Kemal looked down, then pulled his hands away from the table. He left sweaty fingerprints on the polish. When Mushaf looked up, the expression on his face sent a chill of fear twisting through Wahid's gut. He'd worked with Mushaf before, and he knew what that expression meant. There was a reason why the Mukhabarat's cells all had glazed tiling and running water.

Moments later, Kemal's seal joined Wahid's on the table. The fat man looked as if he might cry, his face seemed to fold in on itself.

"Good." Mushaf stood. "Go to Salafaz. You work for him now." And with that, he gathered up the seals from the table and swept out of the room. The other four Mukhabarat captains followed, contempt radiating from them.

After a moment of silence, Wahid pushed back his chair and left the room, Kemal trailing after.

When they reached the jail, Salafaz laughed in their face.

* * * *

"What have we here, then?" Salafaz laughed. "Looks to me like two of the noble Mukhabarat! But what can they be doing down here with us?" He put a theatrical finger to his chin and looked up. "I wonder...so very strange."

Behind the skeletally thin Salafaz, the other jailors smirked. Like Salafaz, their clothes and bearing proclaimed the meanness of their station. Though their khanduras were clean, they were patched and threadbare. Their skin was an unhealthy pale, the result of living their lives in the warren of tunnels that wormed through the pink granite of the Pillar of Heaven.

"We are Mukhabarat," Kemal blustered. "You'll treat us with respect!"

Salafaz grinned. It was like watching a skull smile. "Is that so? That's not what I was told. Perhaps we should go and discuss this discrepancy with Captain Mushaf?"

Kemal looked down. Sweat gleamed on his forehead.

Wahid said nothing. Sour anger

"We need hawks." Mushaf tapped the seal with his finger. "Not jackals."

roiled in his belly.

"That's good." Salafaz's grin broadened. "Now. I have something easy to get you started. See that?" He gestured to two small carts against one wall. "One of those is for food. Get yourselves up to the kitchens and fill up each of those bowls. One for each cell. Bread and water, that's what the prisoners get. Begin with the Alef row, then work down."

Wahid glanced at the cart, then back at Salafaz.

"No questions?" Salafaz spread his arms. "You don't want to know what the other cart is for?" He grinned.

"Well?" Wahid asked sullenly.

"See, what happens is, first they eat, and then they..." Salafaz mimed squatting. "You understand, right? Slops, we call it. See, the problem is the granite. Digging water pipes through granite..." Salafaz shook his head. "That's hard work, that is. So down here, we don't have the running water you get outside. Instead, we get slops. And slops need cleaning up. Now some of them can walk, so you can get them to clean their own slops. But some of them..." Salafaz shrugged. "You know how the Mukhabarat get. Legs and arms." He mimed snapping something, sucked in a breath and shook his head sorrowfully. "So for them as can't walk, you need to clean up for them."

Wahid looked at the cart again, then at Salafaz's grinning skull-like face. He held Salafaz's gaze for a moment, then looked down, hating himself but knowing that he had no choice. Rage burned the back of his throat.

They reached the Alef row soon enough. Wahid pushed the cart with the bowls of food, crawling with resentment—and knowing he had no choice. But when they opened the door to the first cell—Alef seven—Wahid cracked.

* * * *

Wahid pushed open the door, then recoiled in disgust. The stink rolled out: a thick and nauseating blend of stale sweat, urine, excrement, and the unmistakable stench of sickness.

"I'm not going in there," Kemal said.

"What?" Wahid demanded.

Kemal stepped back from the cart. "I said, I'm not going in there."

Wahid jabbed his finger at Kemal. "You're not telling me what to do. You hear me?"

"I'm not going in there." The fat man shook his head stubbornly.

Wahid's fists clenched. "What? So you're just going to leave it for me?"

"I said I'm not going in there." Kemal folded his arms. "And I'm not. You got that?" He paused. "And you're not either. We're Mukhabarat. We don't wipe up... this." He gestured to the darkness of the cell.

"We *were* Mukhabarat!" Wahid said. "No more! Don't you understand, yet?"

"I'm not going in there. I'm not doing this."

Wahid trembled with sudden rage. "We have to! Don't you understand, you fat toad? Mushaf is waiting for us! One word from Salafaz, and he'll take you. You want that?"

"Salafaz can go fuck his goats for all I care," Kemal snarled. "And I'll tell him that! I should not be here, and I'm not going in *there*." He pointed through the open door, then turned to leave—but he didn't take a single step.

Wahid turned to look. At the end of the corridor, he saw Salafaz standing in the dim lamplight with his arms folded. Salafaz's face looked more like a skull than ever, in the gloom; the light gleamed from the grease on his forehead and cheekbones, but his eyes were dark pits.

Salafaz said nothing, simply stared, his eyes impenetrable pools of blackness. A rat scuttled past Wahid's feet, a half-seen blur of glossy black in the gloom. The stench wafted out of the half-open cell door; it prickled the back of Wahid's throat, turned his stomach. From inside the cell came a moan: pain and despair distilled into a raw sound.

Wahid glared at Salafaz, his rage curdling in his belly. That Hand! That damned Hand! *He* had done this!

But Salafaz still stood at the end of the corridor.

Wahid turned on his heel. He grabbed the mop and bucket from Kemal's hands, unable to meet the fat man's eyes, then stalked into the darkness of the cell, breathing only through his mouth to try and limit the stench.

Wisely, Kemal said nothing. He pulled the door to the cell fully open, allowing what little light there was in the corridor to penetrate into the interior of the cell.

Kemal stepped back from the cart. "I said, I'm not going in there."

As Wahid's eyes became accustomed to the gloom—thicker by far than that in the corridor outside—he began to make out details. Rotting straw covered the rough stone floor of the cell. Like all the others, this cell had been hacked out of the granite of the Pillar of Heaven, and the floor and walls were crude and unfinished. Putrid matter fouled the corners of the cell.

The prisoner lay on her side in

the center of the room, curled up in on herself. Someone had chopped off her hair, and now it grew in irregular patches and tufts, like clumps of wild grass. She looked emaciated; even under the dirt ground into her skin, Wahid could see the bones poking up, tendons like cables—the anatomy of starvation. Her clothes were stained dark at the groin and buttocks.

Wahid stared down at her, his fists clenched tight. How could someone allow themselves to sink so low? To become this vile thing? And now Wahid would have to shovel her filth from the cell. She was *lying* in it, the repulsive whore! Could she not even haul her fetid carcass to the corner of the cell?

Wahid's anger took hold of him by the throat and shook him hard. He stalked over to the woman, then kicked her hard in the back. She cried out in pain, a thin sound, weak. But this just stoked Wahid's rage, and he grabbed her shoulder—being careful not to step in the soiled straw near her legs—then yanked her onto her back, hand raised to beat the bitch for her vileness.

She had blue eyes. But not just blue—they were the clear azure of the midday sky: profound, unsullied, with a depth in them that reached out and swallowed Wahid, and he found himself returned to a child in summer, laying on his back in the cornflowers and watching the sky, watching the birds wheel overhead while the breeze caressed his cheek with warm fingers and whispered wordless secrets in his ear.

And then she blinked, and Wahid was back in the cell, bounded by darkness and sullen granite, back in the stench and filth of the jail. And Wahid remembered the summers the way they had truly been: his father's strap and Wahid's back, welts and weeping, silent meals with an empty chair where Wahid's mother should have been.

Wahid's face contorted with anger, and he bent over and slapped the bitch hard: *thwack, thwack,* forehand and back, his fingers leaving livid marks under the skin and his knuckles stinging from the force of the blow. He straightened up, kicked her again, then snarled at Kemal to bring the cart in and give him the shovel.

But for the rest of the long and nauseating round through the Alef row, shoveling human excrement and filth into buckets that slopped and stank, and then finding themselves one bucket short and having to climb back to the kitchens for more, Wahid could not forget the color of her eyes.

And when he finally slept, he dreamed of cloudless summer skies and the smell of hay.

The next day, she spoke to him.

* * * *

The stench was, if anything, worse than the day before. Wahid grimaced as the cell door swung open. The stink got in his eyes, forced its way down his throat and into his nose. The same anger roiled in him—this wasn't fair; it wasn't his *fault*—but Wahid wasn't going to give that skull-faced bastard Salafaz the satisfaction.

He pushed himself into the cell, waited for his eyes to adjust. She lay on her side again, coiled—furled, like a bud. She was muttering to herself, soft words spilling out; the sound soothing, like a lullaby.

Kemal followed him in, but Wahid was scarcely aware of the fat man. He stared at the woman lying on the stone, and though his anger and shame still swirled within, he was above them, in a place where the sky was pellucid sapphire and the breezes were warm and smelled of hay.

She turned to look at them, moving only her head. Her eyes opened, and once more their depth reached out and enfolded Wahid. Beside him, he heard Kemal gasp—but it was a distant thing, unimportant, because now she was speaking, edgeless words in a language that Wahid did not know but that he understood anyway. Primal, uncorrupted, the words slipped in through Wahid's eyes and bound a skein in his mind: shimmering blue, a supple cradle to hold him soft and sing to him of summer.

Wahid could not forget the color of her eyes.

Wahid blinked and found himself outside the cell, the door ajar, and Kemal standing next to him, gazing stupidly at the door as sweat trickled down his face.

And when Wahid looked up, he saw Salafaz standing silent at the end of the corridor, his face turned skeletal by the gloom: shadowed eyes and hollow cheeks—as if dead Ghairud in his Aspect of the Uninvited Guest stood there: skin stretched tight over wasted flesh and hard planes of bone.

There was a long silence, broken only by the tail-end of murmuring from inside the cell. Then Salafaz raised his hand and beckoned, peremptorily—as if summoning a dog.

The door to the cell closed; the lock clicked, and the last of the sky withdrew from Wahid's head, leaving him with only the curds of his anger clotted in his throat.

Salafaz beckoned again, and this time Wahid went, already hunching his shoulders as sour rage ate at his stomach—short

stabbing pains like hot needles. Why was he here? Why? *Why?* This was not right; he should be outside, where the sky was blue and you could look into it forever. He was of the Line of Haum, and he had no place here in tunnels that wormed through stone far below the light.

Wahid stopped in front of Salafaz, who then looked over Wahid's shoulder, eyes shadowed. He said nothing.

When Wahid finally glanced over his shoulder , he saw Kemal in the middle of the corridor. The fat man stood motionless, arms loose. Tears were running down his sweaty cheeks and glistening in the dim light.

* * * *

"She spoke to you," Salafaz said. It was not a question. The oil lamp in front of him cast a lambent light, softening the hard angles of Salafaz's skull-like face. The bowl of pomegranates to the side glowed, the light making the fruit seem rich and plump, as if fashioned from gold.

Wahid had not been asked to sit. He shifted his weight, his legs grumbling. He looked down at Salafaz, feeling a craving he couldn't put a name to. His fingers twitched; his eyes felt hot and peppery; a headache thudded dully in his temples.

"She did," Wahid said.

"What did she say?"

Wahid hesitated. What *had* she said? What words?

Salafaz regarded him steadily, unblinking, like a lizard. "You can't remember, can you?"

"And?" Wahid snarled. "Am I supposed to remember?"

Salafaz did not reply.

"They all say the same!" Wahid waved a hand angrily. He'd been in the Mukhabarat; he knew the pleas of prisoners. "They have powerful friends! They will do anything! The Shah will hear of their plight and pull them from the cells! It means nothing—and they all sing the same note in the end."

An image flashed in Wahid's mind: the last prisoner he'd seen Mushaf interrogate, the way the man had writhed on his belly like a broken-backed snake, every joint smashed or ground to powder, and the man snuffling and whimpering and leaving a greasy trail of blood on the tiled floor.

The image revolted him.

"I know she spoke to you," Salafaz said. "I can see it in your eyes."

"And what of it?" Wahid demanded. "Am I wrong? Are you going to blame me for this? She spoke! That is all!" He chopped his hand through the air.

"There are things you do not know about Alef seven," Salafaz said. He placed two objects on the table in front of him. The first was a length of dirty cotton, the second a knife—a crescent-shaped blade with the edge on the inner curve, razor-sharp and glinting in the yellow light.

"If she speaks again, do not listen." Salafaz pointed to the knife. "You would do best if you cut out her tongue. But if you cannot, use the gag."

Wahid stared at Salafaz. "Who is she?"

Salafaz reached forward and tapped the handle of the knife. "Use the knife," he said. "And do not listen."

When Wahid left Salafaz's room, he stood for a moment in the corridor, suddenly uncertain. His skin crawled and hunger gnawed at his belly—but not for food. He wanted... He wanted...

Outside the door to the cell, he met Kemal. The fat man looked at him, all bluster gone. There was something in Kemal's eyes that Wahid recognized: a twin of Wahid's hunger.

Wahid opened the door and stepped into the cell.

Inside was the sky.

* * * *

The lamb sizzled on Wahid's plate, the savory juices bubbling and a warm and meaty smell wafting up. The bread was thick with grease; the onions tart and crisp.

Wahid just looked at it, while around him the palace staff snuffled and grunted like pigs at the trough. Kemal sat opposite him with another plate of the grilled lamb. Like Wahid's, it was untouched.

"Can you remember?" Kemal asked, his voice quiet.

Wahid looked up. He said nothing.

Kemal licked his lips. "She was..." His voice trailed off.

But though Kemal didn't say it, Wahid knew what he meant. When he'd pushed open the door last night, the woman had been lying in the center of the cell. She'd rolled over to look at them, and her face was fuller; flesh cloaking the sharp-edged bone, softening her features. And though the cell stank, there was a breath of something else, a cleaner smell of sunshine and summer, as if a breeze blew in from an invisible window.

And then she'd started speaking, and after that point, Wahid's memory dissolved into the sky and he was lost in summer.

"She was nothing," Wahid snapped. "She *is* nothing." But his voice sounded weak—even to him.

"Even when I am outside, I hear her."

The weight of the granite above his head weighed heavily on him. The constant gloom of the dark corridors below the palace had crept into his heart, shadowing it with dank fingers. He felt the thickness of the walls; the air smelled stale, rank with sweat and despair.

Kemal watched Wahid from across the table. He glanced down at Wahid's plate. "You haven't eaten your lamb."

Wahid plucked one of the steaming chunks of meat from his plate. He held it up for Kemal to see, then popped it in his mouth.

Kemal's face was expressionless. He watched Wahid in silence, his eyes hooded, a lone droplet of sweat trickling down his cheek.

Wahid chewed. The meat was tender, the sauce piquant. But he had to force himself to swallow, then clench his jaw tight as his stomach rebelled. He could taste the blood. The food wasn't just *meat*; it was seared chunks of dead flesh.

"You see?" Kemal said.

"I see my meal, which the sight of your face is preventing me from enjoying," Wahid said. He picked up the bread, tore it savagely in half, then stuffed one half into his mouth. It was warm, fresh and moist and fragrant. But it tasted of straw, and grit from the millstone coated Wahid's tongue, clogging between his teeth like wet sand.

Salafaz had given him, the wickedly sharp edge. He pushed the pomegranate away. "I am not hungry."

Kemal did not retrieve the pomegranate. He glanced at it, then looked back at Wahid, with an expression that Wahid could not at once identify. Then he pushed back his chair and stood.

"Where are you going?" Wahid snapped, needled by the way Kemal was looking at him.

"She speaks to me," Kemal said. "Even when I am outside, I hear her." He paused, licked his lips. "I think, soon..." His voice trailed off, then, abruptly, he turned and left.

Wahid glared at Kemal's retreating back. The fat man was weak; he'd always been weak. Weak-minded and weak-willed both.

Images of a limitless blue swam into Wahid's mind; he felt himself falling upwards into it—

Cursing, Wahid pressed his hands to the side of his head. It was the woman; she'd done something to him. Those words she'd said, they'd wormed into his head, poisoned him. Who was she? *Who was she?*

Wahid stood. He looked down at the pomegranate on the table, then picked it up and hurled it savagely from him. The burr of conversation in the refectory cut off; people turned to stare—but Wahid paid them no heed as he stalked from the room. He pressed a hand to his stomach where shooting pains stabbed at him. Grimacing, Wahid hurried through the gloomy corridors, heading for the records room and the leather-bound records stacked in the shelves.

* * * *

When Wahid reached the records room, he peered in. It was empty. A single lamp lit the front of the room; the shelves stretched away into gloom. The air smelled dry, acrid. A breeze sighed past Wahid's face: part of a cunningly designed ventilation system. Dry air blew in from outside, flushing the records room and keeping the damp of the jail at bay. Without it, the books would rot quickly in the fetid gloom.

Wahid glanced over his shoulder, then stepped through the narrow alcove and into the records room. Ignoring the nearest shelves where the requisitions and correspondence were stacked, he headed for the prisoners' records. There, he pulled out the most recent volume, and started running his finger down the entries, looking for cell Alef seven.

It wasn't there. Not on the first page, nor the second, nor any as far back as Wahid looked. By the time Wahid reached the end of the volume, the two-hundredth leaf, the faded entries of name, description, crime, and punishment were dated 12th Year of K. Rustam i Fars, more than fifteen years ago.

Had she been in that cell fifteen years? Wahid wondered. But... she'd looked so young, and her eyes had been so blue: deep and clear and—

Wahid pinched the web of skin between his thumb and first finger. The pain was eye-watering sharp, and around him, the shelves snapped back into solidity. He rammed the book back in its place on the shelf. So she'd been there more than fifteen years. And? The bitch!

He pulled out the next volume, started searching. No mention of cell Alef seven. When Wahid reached the end, he snarled, then

> The steel caught the soft lamplight, making it look as if the blade was on fire.

Kemal reached into his pocket, pulled out a wrinkled pomegranate. He placed it gently on the table in front of Wahid.

Wahid stared at the fruit, the scent of it tickling his nose, smelling of warm sun and summer breeze.

"Salafaz has a bowl of them in his room," Kemal said.

Wahid thought of the knife

went on to the next. He'd find the bitch; she couldn't hide from him!

Volume after volume, Wahid scanned. Book after book, working his way slowly along the shelf, moving away from the small pool of lamplight and into the shadows that lurked beyond. The names in the books rolled past, along with the entries that told of life and death: dates of torture, dates of confessions, dates of death: suicides, beheadings, hangings. Rarely, so rarely, there was a date and a small notation: *released.* On and on the list went: the roll-call of the dead and broken, with a lucky few set free, as the fisherman down in the swamps of Heshem's Midden threw the smaller catfish back into the gloomy water.

Finally, he found it: a neatly written entry, inked carefully between faint guidelines on the paper:

a7: wmn. frm smr. tkn blck hghwy by s. hmd i krn. 7 K. HSNYH

Wahid stared at the entry, acidic anger crawling slowly up his throat. He repeated the words to himself, and they tasted sour in his mouth: Alef seven: Woman. From Sumiri. Taken at the Black Highway by Sen Hamad i Kuren. 7th year of Khosrau Hasaniyeh.

There was nothing more.

Wahid glared at the entry. What was the meaning of this? That she was a woman, Wahid knew. But what was he supposed to make of the rest of the entry? That she came from Sumiri? Wahid's lip curled. Was she a thief then? Caught trying to sneak down the Black Highway after creeping through the frozen bones of the Sumiri?

All men knew of Sumiri. The city had been dead for four thousand years, her once-beautiful women nothing more than dust and tattered memories, her strong-voiced men no more than the moan of the wind as it sang through the empty stone towers where ice rimed the windows and snow lay piled in great drifts and the stars looked down through the thin air, close and unwinking as they watched.

But though Sumiri was dead, it drew thieves as a dead man draws maggots. They crawled though the dead city, searching for anything left behind after the Fall, when the people fled from the thinness of the demon-swallowed air, down to the slopes of what had been the ocean and was now the Middle World. Sorcery lurked deep in the bones of the dead city: cruel necromancy, and the demons that fed on it.

So she'd been a thief, nothing more than a grave robber. But where was her name? Wahid looked at the entries above and below; both gave names. Her entry had none. And then he looked again at the date: 7th year of Khosrau Hasaniyeh.

Wahid glared at the book. Shah Hasaniyeh had died more than two hundred years ago.

A movement caught his eye, and when Wahid looked up, he saw Salafaz standing at the end of the aisle, looking at him and holding a knife, a long and evil-looking Pelishti blade, serrated on the back edge.

The steel caught the soft lamplight, making it look as if the blade was on fire.

* * * *

"Just what are you doing here?" Salafaz jerked the knife's point, directing Wahid to stand on the other side of the records room from him.

"Who is she?" Wahid demanded.

"Forgotten, have you?" Salafaz pointed the knife at Wahid. "You're not in the Mukhabarat any more. You answer to me, and I'm the one asking questions here."

Wahid felt a tight pain in his chest, an unbearable constriction. He felt throttled by it, confined so tight he must burst. But what Salafaz said was true, and above Salafaz was Mushaf, pitiless and hard as the granite of the Pillar of Heaven. Just let Salafaz run to Mushaf, and Wahid's life would be worth nothing, less than nothing.

Why? *Why him?*

"Tell me what you were doing!" Salafaz glared at Wahid.

And all at once, the idea came into Wahid's mind. He looked at Salafaz, *really* looked, and for the first time, Wahid saw the extent of Salafaz's emaciation: the sunken cheeks, the withered muscles, the prominent bones in Salafaz's hands—just skin stretched too tight and thin over tendon and knuckle.

Wahid straightened up. The pain in his chest loosened. He understood now, and it was as if Salafaz's skin had turned to greased paper, allowing Wahid to see the meat of the man's thoughts moving sluggishly underneath.

"Who is she?" Wahid said. He took a step forward.

"I ask the questions!" Salafaz snapped. But his voice was brittle, and Wahid saw the flicker of unease and lust in Salafaz's eyes.

"Tell me," Wahid said. He held up the book, opened it so Salafaz could see. "Seventh Year of Khosrau Hasaniyeh? Who is she?"

Salafaz stepped back. "I told you not to listen."

Wahid took another step forward. He could smell Salafaz now, a sweet-sour reek of spoiled

"Do you understand the words you're saying?"

fruit. "Who is she?"

"You think I know?" Salafaz's back bumped against the wall. "How would I know?"

"Pomegranates." Wahid let the word fall, then waited. He did not need to say Mushaf's name; the terror of the Mukhabarat hung between them, unspoken but acknowledged by both.

Salafaz glanced to either side, as if seeking help. "I don't know. I..." He licked his lips. "You've read the book. What else can I say?"

"Who is she?" Wahid placed the book on the table near him. He looked at the knife, held loose in Salafaz's hand.

"I don't know. No one knows." Salafaz looked up at Wahid's face. "All that anyone knows is in that book. She came from Sumiri, and they took her at the Black Highway. There is nothing else."

Wahid said nothing, but the image of the knife was bright in his mind.

Salafaz followed Wahid's gaze to the knife. He smiled bitterly. "There is more. The cell, often it is not there. Did you not wonder about the missing bucket? She chooses who can enter—and she chose you."

"What has she done to me?" Wahid demanded.

"I don't know," Salafaz replied. "But...it will not stop."

"What do you mean?" Wahid said, inching forward and watching Salafaz intently. His hand twitched.

"It never stops," Salafaz said, his voice low. "Always, you can hear it. Singing. There is singing in the sky. And after you've heard it, you can see, truly see. Food turns to grit and clinker and bloody flesh in your mouth, yet those next to you smack their lips and reach for more. A shirt of water silk turns to twine when it touches your body; music becomes the yowling of tomcats; the subtlest perfume reeks of rancid oil and rotting fruit." Salafaz's voice rose a notch. "But none of *them* have changed. It is here!" He tapped his heart, his eyelids. "And it never stops!"

Wahid reached for the knife. Salafaz looked down, laughed wildly, held it out to Wahid. "Take it, then! See for yourself! You are thinking of killing me with this. I can read it in you. Do it! If you can."

Wahid's hand tensed on the handle of the knife. Rage bubbled like a vat of poison in his belly; this old goat had sent him in that cell, sent him to the witch. He'd known what would happen and now the witch was inside Wahid's head, festering there. *He'd* done it; *he* had let the witch in. The tip of the knife trembled as Wahid's hand shook.

But the remembered feel of the handle of his knife stopped him—the feel of his knife the first time he'd killed a man. The slight resistance as the skin held under the blade, and then the hot and sticky flood as the blood ran over his hands, and the silky cut as the blade parted living flesh. Nausea rose in the back of Wahid's throat.

Salafaz laughed again, a harsh rasping bark. "You see? You cannot!"

Wahid tried to force himself to strike, to silence the old man's hateful mouth. But though his muscles trembled with anger and shame, he could not do it.

Wahid threw the knife from him with a cry. It skittered into a corner, hidden in shadows. Wahid turned and fled, Salafaz's barking laugh pursuing him. Wahid stumbled through the dark tunnels to his quarters, where he lay awake on his bed, staring at the ceiling above and pinching himself until his fingers bled, to stop himself from sleeping. Every time he closed his eyes, the blue in his mind expanded and reached for him, and Wahid would not allow himself to be pulled into that void, no matter if it smelled of summer fields and sounded like his mother calling his name.

After an interminable wait in the darkness, Wahid heard someone fumbling at the door.

A moment later, it swung open, and a man stepped in.

* * * *

Wahid glared at Kemal. "Are you mad?"

"Does that mean no?" Kemal asked. Sweat gleamed on his face—but Kemal looked...different. Thinner, more upright. And the sweat was a sheen on his forehead and cheeks, not the thick droplets it had been before. He carried two packs, both heavy, bulging.

"Of course it means no!" Wahid said. "Are you crazed? Can you hear yourself?"

Kemal nodded calmly. "Very well. If you won't come, then so be it."

If I won't come?" Wahid glanced at the door to his cell, leaned closer to Kemal. "Do you understand the words you're saying? You want to take...*her* out of the palace?"

"Yes," Kemal said. "I understand. Many things, now." He paused, looked at Wahid's eyes. "She comes from Sumiri, do you know that?"

"How?" Wahid demanded. "How do you know that? Did Mushaf tell you? Have you been sneaking to him?"

"She told me," Kemal said.

"There's nothing left but ice and ghosts!"

"She's told me many things. Or perhaps only one—but it's a real thing, the truth."

Wahid's eyes hurt, as if someone had pressed sand into them. He stared at Kemal, seeing something in the fat man's face that hadn't been there before. Wahid couldn't place it—but he felt the knowledge hanging just out of reach; if he would only reach up, he could touch it—up, up into the sky and—

"You see?" Kemal said. "She is trying to tell you, as well. Why will you not listen?"

Wahid pressed one fist into the side of his head. "She is a witch. I will not. I will *not*." He glared suddenly at Kemal. "And you, if you think I will help you, then you are mad. You're weak!"

"You were right when you said we were no longer Mukhabarat," Kemal said. "I didn't believe you then, but now..." He shrugged. "We are something else. And I will not leave her in the cell as Salafaz did."

"So you are taking her back to Sumiri?" Wahid snarled. "Fool! First you have to escape the palace, and then what? It's eight days to Ibrahim's Ladder, and how far will you get with the Mukhabarat after you? And even if Mushaf does not catch you, Sumiri is dead!" Wahid was shouting now, but he couldn't stop himself. "It died in the Fall! There's nothing left but ice and ghosts! Why? *Why?*"

Kemal said nothing for a long time, simply looked at Wahid with that same indefinable expression on his face. Eventually, he said, "If you listened, you would know." He turned, placed one of the bags next to Wahid's door, then left the room.

Wahid listened to Kemal's footsteps retreating down the hall. Kemal was crazed. The witch had crawled inside his head and now nested there like a malevolent wasp, plucking on the strings of Kemal's mind.

But Kemal's face hung in front of him, with that hidden expression on it, the one that Wahid could not identify, but which had subtly changed Kemal's whole being, the way even a single flower can change the mood of a room.

He could go with them. He could leave the palace, head up, up the slope to Ibrahim's Ladder, and then out to the World Above, to ancient Sumiri, Jewel of the South, he could climb up, look at the sky and stand underneath it with his arms spread and the blue above him and he could sing and wait for it to open and let him fall up into the endless sapphire, he could—

Freeze? Wahid asked himself savagely. Sumiri was dead! Nothing lived there save the beasts of the World Above—the ice worms, the cave bears, the dire wolves. And if Kemal escaped those, then what? A life spent in servitude to the witch? No! Wahid was of the Line of Haum; he was no woman's slave!

And so Wahid sat on his bed in the gloom, pinching his skin to keep himself awake, staring wild-eyed at the ceiling and waiting for dawn to come.

In the morning, Mushaf came for him. Unspeaking, he took Wahid to the cells of the Mukhabarat, where a broken and mutilated Kemal hung dying on the Qoph frame.

* * * *

"There," Mushaf said, gesturing to the Qoph frame. Wrists nailed to the top pieces, Kemal hung loose in the limp way that Wahid knew meant shattered joints. Mushaf had been thorough; what God had fashioned, Mushaf had undone. More than simple destruction, Mushaf had unraveled Kemal, laid him open to reveal the dark and glistening secrets of his flesh. Blood still oozed from the flayed muscle; Kemal's breath still hitched—but Wahid knew the signs of impending death.

"He would not speak." Mushaf wiped his hands on a cloth. Scarlet grimed the creases in his skin.

Wahid watched as a droplet of crimson gathered on Kemal's chin, swelled, then dropped to land in the spreading pool below the Qoph frame.

"He spoke only one word," Mushaf said, walking round to stand beside Wahid. "He told us to listen. Just that. Listen." Mushaf peered at Kemal's ruined face. "Do you know where we found him?"

Wahid held himself very still. He thought quickly, but his mind ran in tiny little circles like a snared hare. He knew why Mushaf had brought him here, and it wasn't to ask casual questions. If Wahid gave the wrong answer, it would be him on the Qoph frame.

"No," he said finally.

"Oh?" Mushaf's voice held nothing but careful disinterest—nothing overtly threatening—but Wahid had heard Mushaf using the same tone while removing the skin from a man's face. "Well then, I must enlighten you. Sen Salafaz came to us yesterday, said he thought someone might try to free a prisoner held on row Alef. We caught Kemal here as he tried to enter the row. He had a bag with him. It held keys, food, clothes. Did he tell you of this?"

Kemal coughed. Blood glistened on his chin.

Wahid opened his mouth to reply, but then Kemal looked up, and Wahid saw his eyes, and the expression that filled them as Kemal looked at Wahid. One eye was a ruined mess of bloody jelly, but the other was unclouded and clear and the iris was a deep azure. And as Wahid looked into Kemal's good eye, he saw the sky there, the clean blue that went on forever. And in the midst of blood and filth and pain, Wahid smelled new-cut hay and felt the breathy caress of a summer breeze.

"Well?" Mushaf asked.

Kemal coughed again. Blood ran

out from his mouth, a thick stream down his chin. His breath gurgled, then his head dropped forward and he died. But his expression did not change, and though Mushaf had *reduced* Kemal, Wahid saw clearly, and finally understood, and his fear dropped from him.

"No," Wahid said finally. "He told me nothing."

"I see," Mushaf said. He tossed the blood-stained cloth to one of the Mukhabarat, who caught it deftly. "Do you think it is wise to lie to me?"

Wahid looked Mushaf in the eye. His voice was steady. "I have not lied."

"Ah?" Mushaf said. "That is well, then. You are dismissed."

Wahid bowed, then walked from the room. But as a needle pierces an abscess to allow the filth and pus to burst out, so too had the expression in Kemal's face punched deep into Wahid, spearing through the sour envy and throttled rage and penetrating deep into Wahid's core, and now something bitter and vile was flowing out of Wahid.

He was of the Line of Haum, and yet...what was left of the most ancient and noble Line of Haum? A cottage upslope from the city, a spread of stony fields, a clutch of moldering tombs in the necropolis. Those, and the lingering pride and bitterness that had poisoned Wahid's father, turning him sour and pinched. Wahid could see it now, and the knowledge hurt the way a scab does when it peels from the skin—pain, but a clean pain.

Wahid thought of his father, the last time he'd seen him. The old man had been laid out on his deathbed, wasted by the cancer in his bowels that had killed him. His face had fallen in, and his cheekbones jutted out like the stones in the fields outside. He'd died alone; he had crawled up onto his bed to lay himself out, knowing none would weep for him.

Wahid would not die like that. Nor would he choose Salafaz's road, and end up the same: a man starved and shriveled, a man who'd been offered summer but had chosen fear and self-loathing and living in the dark among pain and suffering.

When he reached the entrance to his room, he ducked inside for a brief moment, then emerged holding a leather bag slung over his back.

At the doorway, Wahid paused, looked back over his shoulder. He thought of the Mukhabarat, now doubtless prowling the corridors of the under-palace. He thought of the guards at the city gates, the patrols, the bandits and slavers that infested the upper slope. He thought of Sumiri, frozen and dead. What waited for him there? Ice and snow and ghost-haunted stone. Empty towers with windows like eyes in a skull. Cave bears, dire wolves, ice worms. Death.

And yet as Wahid turned back to the gloomy corridor, he heard his mother calling him, and her voice was soft and filled with love. And he smelled the fresh-cut hay of his youth, that so tickled when lain upon. And he saw the blue of summer, the cloudless magical sky that had held such promise.

There were demons in Sumiri. All men knew this.

But perhaps there were other things as well.

* * * *

The upper slope, and the air is thin. A cold wind moans down from the World Above, bringing with it flurries of drifting snow. Below, *far* below, is the tree line, pines like a gray-green cloud rolling over the stone.

A basalt precipice juts from the slope, a cliff of black and jointed stone. To either side it stretches, tall and forbidding like the walls of a giant's fortress. It is unbroken, save for a single notch, here, where the rock-cut staircase of Ibrahim's Ladder worms up through the belly of the cliff to emerge on the wind-scoured basalt plain above, the ancient prelapsarian coastline and the beginning of the road to old Sumiri.

Four figures wrapped in furs stand at the bottom of Ibrahim's Ladder. They carry heavy packs and long spears. They watch two people climbing the slope toward them: a thin-faced man in a thick cloak and a woman whose face is hidden by the hood she has pulled forward.

The four figures look at each other; they are thieves, and here come two who look ripe for plucking. But then the man draws closer, and the four figures see his eyes, and the deep blue light that shines behind them, and the four thieves feel the warm breath of summer on their faces and they smell the lazy harvest smells of drying hay and cut wheat and they think of their mothers and their children, and they stand aside without speaking.

The man and the woman climb up the steps until the gloom in the narrow staircase swallows them.

The thieves watch in silence. Then the wind picks up strength, and a chill blast swirls snow over the top of the basalt ridge.

The thieves shiver, look at each other, then turn and begin their long descent.

About the Author:
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The Strange Case of Madelcine H. Marsh (Aged 14¼)

by Von Carr

MadMarsh

Here's a random question, lol! How do you get an Unspeakable Horror out of the basement? Just asking for fun! kthnxbye.

On Monday, the Dark Gods manifested in the basement. Maddie might not have noticed, except that she'd lost her math homework somewhere in the cavernous depths of the house, and had run out of places to look for it.

As usual, Maddie was in a panic. Sam's brother was supposed to pick her up in a few minutes, and Maddie didn't want to be late, she didn't want to make anyone else late. She was frantically rooting through a pile of newspapers when she remembered: the freezer. Last night she'd run down to get a microwavable dinner during a commercial break. Perhaps in her worry over the future of her favorite *Top Model* contestant (the blind one with the big ears), she'd overlooked the fact her homework was still in her hand when she'd rushed downstairs.

Maddie felt a wave of relief. That was it. The binder must be next to the freezer. She ran down the stairs, threw open the basement door, and stumbled into a vortex of eldritch horror.

The amazing thing, Maddie thought afterwards, was that she knew the Dark Gods of H. P. Lovecraft the instant she saw them. It was like the first time she'd seen a cockroach crawl across the sidewalk, and recoiled in instinctual revulsion. But whereas she'd heard a lot about cockroaches, Maddie knew very little about Dark Gods. A month ago, Jennifer Tyo (who now insisted everyone call her Victoria), had given Maddie a Lovecraft book for Mrs. Herman's reading swap. Maddie had tried to read it, but the book turned out to be a collection of old, wordy short stories, none of which were nearly as gross as the cover's depiction of gaunt people tearing into their own rib cages. She'd given up halfway through.

And now the Dark Gods were in her basement.

They were undeniably Lovecraft's gods; no one else's. Names that Maddie would not have been able to remember before, let alone pronounce, gibbered in the shadows of her mind. *Yog-Sothoth. Hastur the Unspeakable One. Shub-Niggurath, the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young.* They were all there, floating in the impossible void of time and chaos that had suddenly opened in the Marshes's cellar. The sole exception was the appalling Nyarlathotep, which through some trick of dimensional folding had managed to squeeze itself under her father's pool table.

Standing at the door of the basement, Maddie stared into the unfathomable depths of cosmic horror.

She closed the door.

After a few minutes, she carefully, very carefully, inched the door open so that she could take another look inside. Just to make sure.

She closed the door again.

Sitting on the thin gray carpet of the basement landing, Maddie came to a few conclusions with a speed that would have startled many people who knew her.

1) The Dark Gods of H. P. Lovecraft were in her basement.

2) This was not a good thing.

3) Since this was the first time Maddie had been left alone in charge of the house, and since this was also the first time the gods had appeared in the basement, this was probably, somehow, all her fault.

Number 3 was the worst, because Maddie really did want to prove herself. Seeing her family off on Amanda's week-long college-scouting trip, she'd actually felt a gleam of pride, a sense that, for the first time, she was being treated like an adult. And then her older sister had ruined everything by sticking her head out the car window and saying, laughingly, "Let's hope the house is still here when we get back!"

Maddie knew her sister didn't mean to be cruel; that was the worst part. That was how people thought of Maddie: "a hopeless case," Mom used to say when Maddie was younger, after she had lost a textbook or been late to a movie or accidentally dropped her laptop in the toilet.

But Maddie was older now. She was less distractible. She'd even won the yellow ribbon for "most improved" at soccer practice, for god's sake, and she hated soccer. But all that people could see when they looked at her was kid-Maddie, Maddie the klutz, Maddie the girl who had lost three different cell phones in three different bodies of water.

When her family came back from their boring trip scouting out Amanda's colleges, Maddie wanted them to be shocked by the spotless house and by Maddie's air of sophistication as she greeted them. "Problems?" she'd imagined herself saying to her mother over the pages of the *New York Times* (Maddie would be reading about politics). "No, there were no problems. Jeez Mom, what did you think would happen?"

That had been Friday. Now it was Monday, and already she'd broken a glass while unpacking the dishwasher, and her shampoo had caused a weird green stain on the bathtub, and the Dark Gods of H. P. Lovecraft had invaded the basement, and she'd lost her math homework, and she was going to be late to school and fail her quiz and nothing would ever be okay ever again. Maddie was an abject failure at life. An embarrassing blot on humanity. A–

At this point Maddie realized that the doorbell was ringing and had probably been ringing for several minutes. She ran back up the stairs,

arms and legs flailing in a pinwheel of motion.

"Finally." Sam (formerly Samantha, then Sami with a heart-shaped dot in the "i") was wearing makeup today. Her lips were brick colored, and her enthusiastically plucked brows barely had enough hair left in them to convey the depth and contempt of her frown. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Maddie said. "Yes. Sorry I'm late. I was in the bathroom." She didn't even think about the lie until she said it. Sam's frown lightened a little; bathroom excuses were always acceptable, and nobody ever wanted you to elaborate. "I'll get my bag."

"Sure," Sam said. "But hurry up!"

Maddie ran into the kitchen and grabbed one of the kitchen chairs. Her missing math homework slid off the seat, but she didn't have time to stop, not yet. Clutching the chair in front of her Maddie hurried down the basement stairs, miraculously hitting every step, and placed it on the landing to block the door. The chair might not be enough to contain the Dark Gods, she thought as she retrieved her binder and threw it into her backpack, but it was the best she could do on short notice.

* * * *

At break Maddie ran to the library and checked out a Lovecraft book to read during French. Surreptitious reading was harder than Maddie expected—she had new admiration for the nerds who read under their desks at the front of the classroom—but Lovecraft's prose was easier to get through now that she knew what he was talking about.

Some things about the book were odd: Lovecraft's gods were called Elder Gods in this version, and they sounded less colorful than the unspeakable horrors she'd glimpsed in the transdimensional void beyond the basement door. Nevertheless, Maddie felt she was learning something through her reading. She was learning that she was going to die.

Maddie had hoped there'd be instructions on how to get rid of Dark Gods, but unfortunately Lovecraft's protagonists didn't do a good job in this area. They spent a lot of time going insane, or eating people, or whining about going insane and eating people, and by the time Maddie finished skimming the first book she'd reached the conclusion that Lovecraft's characters were really annoying and probably deserved their fates. This didn't make Maddie feel good about herself.

The stories also made her wonder about her sanity. She was, after all, fourteen, and at fourteen (as countless Scholastic novels had warned her) she was entering the years in which she could develop any number of alarming conditions. Schizophrenia. Leukemia. Drug Addiction. Pregnancy. Pregnancy and Leukemia. Pregnancy and Leukemia and Drug Addiction. The possibilities were endless. And the fact Maddie had led a boring life up to this point did not exclude the possibility she had developed some awful mental illness that made her see fictional monsters in her basement.

Except.

Except that until today, Maddie had not really thought of or remembered the Dark (Elder?) Gods of H. P. Lovecraft. Surely if she was going insane, it would be in a way that was more, well, normal?

But according to Lovecraft, (she realized as Mr. Tyrson put up a yellowed overhead of a plant cell) she must be insane. If the gods were real, they'd have driven her insane by now, and if they weren't, what kind of person saw fictional characters in their basement? *Crazy people.*

Maddie spent the next half hour worrying about her sanity and learning about the anatomy of plant cells. Then it was time for lunch.

By the time she reached the cafeteria, Maddie had decided that she had to tell somebody, if only so they too could look into the basement and tell her if she was crazy.

But her newfound sense of purpose wilted in the face of the school cafeteria. Maybe it was the dreary lighting that flickered overhead, or the pale green color of the walls that made everyone beneath them look slightly leprous, or maybe it was as simple as looking out over the crowd of older, more sophisticated students as they talked and laughed and pretended to fight each other with trays.

Whatever it was, Maddie was newly aware of being wrong; of the essential wrongness of Maddie. First, (she remembered, having catalogued these flaws in front of the mirror that morning) there was her skin, which was blotchy and red. Her T-zone harbored at least four zits, one of which was the most disgusting eruption of obscene flesh ever visited on a teenager. Then there was her face itself, which seemed to have been put together by an unwholesome architect in the depths of some vile city. Her nose was too large; her lips were puffy-looking. Altogether, (she'd decided) Maddie's face looked like a squamous potato, large and lumpish. And despite the money she saved to buy jeans, Maddie's clothing was never cool. She was, Maddie thought miserably, the most grotesque approximation of an American teenager ever to stumble into this cafeteria.

Thankfully Jennifer Tyo (now called Victoria) saved her a seat, so Maddie did not have to display her full awfulness to the school for very long. She, Sam, and Jenny/Victoria sat at the same table as Allison Park, a seating arrangement born of convenience and mediocre social status. Jennifer Eagleton used to sit with them before she got a boyfriend; now she had blond hair and sat with the popular kids, laughing at all their jokes.

"I don't see what's so great about her," Sam muttered, glaring at the back of Jennifer Eagleton's blond and dark-streaked head. "I heard," she continued darkly, "that she used some of Willow's art on her Facebook page, and pretended like it was *hers*."

Perhaps Maddie's glimpse that morning into infinite cosmic horror had warped her sense of evil, but she didn't think Jennifer Eagleton's crime was all that terrible. Nevertheless, she knew her role.

"What a bitch," Maddie said.

"Total bitch," Jenny/Victoria agreed. Allie mumbled something through a mouthful of chicken.

"I know, right?" Glaring at Jennifer, Sam took a long drag on the straw of her soda.

There was a lull in the cafeteria

conversation, and Maddie knew that if she was going to bring up the Dark Gods of H. P. Lovecraft, the time was now. But the words froze in her mouth. She didn't want to see her friends' baffled looks, didn't want to see the slow growth of contempt across their faces. When she forced her mouth open, she was shocked when a completely different set of words fell out.

"You guys want to come over to my place tonight? My parents are out of town."

"A party, huh?" Sam perked up. She liked being invited to things other people weren't.

"My dad's got some beer in the fridge," Jenny/Veronica said. "I can totally bring some over."

Visions of countless teen-movie parties flashed through Maddie's head, and she imagined people she didn't know breaking her mother's Greek vases and vomiting into the aquarium. "Not a party," she said quickly, before she had time to think, "just you guys. I have something to show you."

"Lame," Sam said in disgust. "We could totally have a party."

"Is it okay if we bring homework?" Allison said. "I have a French test tomorrow."

Maddie had never thought she'd be grateful for Allison's nerdiness. "Sure," she said. "That'd be great," and saw Sam's face drop a little as she calculated just how much the nerd factor would impact her ability to throw a party in Maddie's house.

"Whatever," Sam said. "I guess I'll come." And step one in Maddie's plan to prove her own sanity was underway.

* * * *

Sam tried, of course, to invite people to Maddie's house, but it turned out that most people didn't feel like going to an eighth grader's house on a Monday night. Sam seethed in the passenger seat all the way to Maddie's home. "I can't believe these people," she said to her brother, who shrugged.

Maddie was silently grateful that Sam's invitations had fallen on deaf ears. Maddie knew she wasn't cool, but the thought of having to prove her inherent uncoolness by asking people to leave—if she could even bring herself to do that—was a humiliation she'd rather not face.

At first things went better than expected. They watched *Gossip Girl* reruns until Jenny/Victoria and Allie arrived with cheese pizza and a case of beer. Maddie agreed to try a sip (secretly she thought it tasted disgusting), and then they sat in front of the television talking about Anna Wong's Donald Duck tattoo, which she'd gotten at random somewhere downtown and was totally retarded. Veronica and Sam both had a beer alongside their Cokes, but when Maddie went to clear away the table she noticed that the cans were still pretty full.

Then she took the girls down to the basement.

There was no point in arguing with people, Maddie decided. If she opened the door to the basement and all the others saw was a pool table, well, that was how it was. She never liked it in movies when people who could see ghosts and stuff ran around screaming that they could see ghosts, because it never worked, and only convinced people they were crazier than they first appeared.

So when she removed the wooden chair, she didn't say anything. She put her hand on the cold door handle—funny how much she didn't want to touch it again—and quickly, like she was tearing off a Band-Aid, turned the knob. The door opened.

Sam turned pale under her layers of yellow foundation. Allison looked up from the page of notes she'd carried down from upstairs. "Holy shit," Jennifer/Victoria said. "Are those the Dark Gods of H. P. Lovecraft?"

Relief washed over Maddie, followed by icy fear as she looked into the uncanny depths of the void. She hadn't been prepared for this, she realized. She'd been hoping they weren't real.

Allison peered over Maddie's shoulder into the room. "They are," she said with quiet authority. "I've never even heard of them, but they are definitely Lovecraft's Dark Gods. You should probably close the door," she added.

Maddie closed the door. When nerds tell you to do things, you do them.

"Holy shit, Maddie," Sam said. She was upset, and not quite sure what she should be upset about. "When were you going to tell us?"

"You've got the Cthulhu Mythos in your basement!" Victoria said. "That's awesome!"

"It's not awesome," Maddie said, somewhat surprised that she was speaking. She wasn't used to contradicting people. She took a deep breath, feeling as though she'd stepped out onto a very thin ledge. "They're in my basement. And I'm housesitting. And my family comes back on Friday." Her face felt hot.

"Well—" Victoria started to say something encouraging, and then thought about it. "Well, there has to be a way to get rid of them."

"How?"

"Just reverse whatever you did to get those things in your basement," Sam said. The conversation was moving on without her, and she didn't like that.

"I don't know what I did." A bubble of distress was welling up inside Maddie. "I checked the locks. I took out the garbage almost every night. Do you think it was the garbage?"

"Probably," Sam said.

Victoria looked at Sam. "The Dark Gods don't care about garbage or locks," she announced. "Dark Gods don't care about anything. They're unfathomable. That means we don't get them."

"I know what unfathomable means," Sam said, "I looked into the basement too, you know."

"Maybe you should ask your parents when they get home," Allison said. In her world, parents solved everything.

Victoria shook her head. "I don't think you can wait. You're forgetting what the Dark Gods of Lovecraft do," she said. "They *rise*."

Maddie thought unpleasantly of yeast.

"The Dark Gods have hung out for *strange eons*," Victoria said, warming to her theme, "biding their time, waiting for someone or something to disturb their slumber." She flourished

her hand. "At which point they'll *rise* and *annihilate* the universe!"

"Definitely keep the basement door closed," Allison said.

"That won't stop them," Victoria said, in the half-horrified, half-triumphant tone of someone whose summer reading has suddenly turned out to be useful. "No, if they decide to *rise*, we're pretty much screwed."

There was a silence as the girls contemplated Armageddon in their separate ways.

"But in Lovecraft stories the Dark Gods are kind of like the ultimate couch potatoes, right?" Maddie said. It couldn't get that bad. She wouldn't let it. Desperately she thought back to the book she'd skimmed during biology. "They just hang out until some idiot makes a blood sacrifice or crashes a ship into them. Even then, it seems like they need a lot of motivation before they actually get up and destroy something. So I should be safe until the end of the week, right?"

"Who knows?" Even knowing she was standing next to a potential apocalypse didn't faze Sam. She was determined to have her share of the conversation. "Maybe you'll annoy them. So don't play your music too loud or anything."

"If there is a way you can get them out of here, you should do it," Allison observed, in a quiet, old-fashioned voice. "Are you sure you didn't summon them accidentally?"

"Solve a puzzle box, maybe?" Victoria said. "Read aloud from any weird books?"

Maddie shook her head. "I did my homework and watched TV."

"We could get some holy water," Sam said, warming to this idea. "And water guns."

Maddie envisioned Sam walking into the basement with a Super Soaker and flinched. "I don't know about that," she said. "If I was hanging out in someone's basement and a bunch of teens ran in and sprayed me with holy water, I'd get pretty mad."

Sam looked annoyed. "You're not listening," she said. "We go to a church—"

"And Dark Gods are not the same as vampires," Jennifer/Victoria said.

"—and steal some holy water—" Sam glared at Victoria. "Don't interrupt."

"Maybe we should talk about this upstairs," Allison said diplomatically. "We *are* standing right next to the door."

Sam looked as though she was going to say something else, and then thought better of it. She stomped up the basement steps, her boots thumping against the thin carpet. Maddie winced at the sound. She followed the girls into the living room, feeling very uneasy now. Sam was getting angry, she could see, and yet Maddie wasn't sure why. Surely the Dark Gods were Maddie's problem?

"Maybe I should look online," Maddie said in the living room, "and see if there's anything there about getting rid of Dark Gods."

"Don't be dumb," Sam said. "There won't be anything online about them. They're supernatural, like in that show with the guys fighting the supernatural—I forget what it's called—anyway. *They* use holy water."

Victoria threw up her hands. Maddie could see the pen marks on her palm where she'd written down her homework assignment in big bubbly letters. "Holy water won't work on Dark Gods!"

"How do you know?" Sam glared at Victoria. "They're unfathomable, *remember*?"

In the silence that followed, Allison, of all people, looked around and said, "What do you want us to do, Maddie? It's your house."

Victoria looked slightly embarrassed. Sam's hands were on her hips now, and her eyes blazed murder. Maddie knew she expected Maddie to take her side.

Maddie heard the ticking of her father's broken clock in the background, the one with the loose hand that always slipped down to the wrong time. She was keenly aware that the other girls were watching, waiting for her to make a decision.

"I think we should do some research," she said apologetically, directing her words to Sam. "I mean, we don't want to destroy the world or anything."

Sam grunted, and Maddie knew she was in trouble.

"Fine," Victoria said. "I'll get started." Sam pushed past Maddie and headed out of the room. A few seconds later the front door banged loudly.

* * * *

After Sam's departure, each girl researched the Dark Gods problem in her own way. Victoria twirled her hair and got up for snacks a lot. Allison sat on one of the unpacked living room boxes, reading through a pile of books. Maddie clicked through the Lovecraft entries on Wikipedia, and googled phrases like "Dark Gods" and "how to get rid of." Nothing.

Finally Allison stood up and announced, "I have to go home. It's getting late." She looked at Jenny/Victoria. "By the way I think this one is yours. It has your name in it."

Victoria took the book, opened it, grimaced at the "Jenny!" written in neon pen on the inside cover, and handed it to Maddie.

"Don't know if this one will help either," she said. "The story with the evil penguins is pretty awesome though." She cleared her throat, and glanced at Allison. "I guess I should go too," she said. "My parents expected me back, like, an hour ago." She looked guiltily at Maddie. "Let us know if you need anything, okay?"

Maddie nodded, despairing. She saw both girls to the door. They walked off together across the unmowed lawn, talking in low voices and making odd hand gestures. Jennifer/Victoria was trying to convey what a shoggoth was by waving her fingers a lot.

At the table, Maddie tore open a bag of Doritos, and flicked through Victoria's book with orange fingers. This was the book she'd originally read, the one about scientists going insane in Antarctica. Maddie skipped to the end, established there was nothing in it about defeating Dark Gods, and slumped back in her chair.

There was nothing she could do. She was going to have to call her parents, and they were going to think she was crazy. Later, when they came home, they would find out all too late that Maddie's wild tale of the terrifying vistas of reality was true, and what was risen would sink,

and what would sink would *rise*, and the sleepers would spread their loathsomeness and decay over the tottering cities of men! *Iä! Iä! Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah—"*

"—hold on a minute," Maddie said aloud. "I don't even know what that means."

It was true. She'd never got more than a 7/10 on any vocabulary test in English. Something was definitely wrong.

There was a scuttling behind the microwave. Tentatively, Maddie stood and prepared to wield the Lovecraft book as a weapon. Nothing. She edged closer to the microwave, and exchanged the book for one of the knives resting in the sink.

She tapped the microwave. The scuttling jumped higher in the wall, then thundered downward, disappearing into the basement. It sounded disturbingly like rats.

"Huh," Maddie said. Rats. Maybe she could phone an exterminator or something.

But something was bothering her about the book in her hand. She flipped the cheap paperback over and stared again at the front—gross people ripping themselves open while Awful Things lurched behind them—and then at the back cover. "The Dark Gods of H. P. Lovecraft dwell in the depths!" the ad copy screamed in lurid type.

Maddie felt a chill. The Dark Gods. None of the other books had called them that.

Now that she thought about it, the things in the basement resembled the paperback's frothing Dark Gods more than they did the creatures she'd read about during biology. They even *looked* italicized.

And this was the only Lovecraft book she'd read before the manifestation.

Another scuttling sound from the walls.

Maddie looked at the stack of Yellow Pages sitting beside the phone. "Find your solutions inside!" the top one said in a cheerful font.

What if, Maddie thought.

She picked up the telephone book. The first exterminator she called was pretty confident that he could deal with the rats, but was confused about what Maddie meant by Dark Gods. He hung up after she quoted some Lovecraft to him.

She pressed on, doggedly. The next four exterminators hung up too.

Sometime around 8:30 she heard a scuffle behind her and turned to see a radiant piece of chaos crawl over to the refrigerator, and probe the alphabet magnets with its glowing tendrils.

Maddie put down the phone. She picked up the old straw broom her mother had leaned against the kitchen boxes, and thumped the crawling chaos with it. The straw ends of the broom smoked slightly, but the chaos turned purple and flailed its tendrils. Maddie thumped it again. The chaos slithered away a few paces.

They progressed like this back down the basement stairs, with Maddie giving the chaos a poke with the rapidly charring end of the broom every time it tried to escape. She chased it very slowly back through the door that had been left ajar. Then she shut the door, firmly, and put the kitchen chair back in place.

It occurred to Maddie, on her way back up the stairs, that she might not be going about this in the right way. Maybe, like dealing with Sam or crawling bits of unholy chaos, she needed to be a bit more assertive.

This time Maddie held the telephone book out in front of her and glared at it. "I need a solution to the problem of Lovecraftian Dark Gods in my basement," she told the book that promised solutions on its cover, and opened the book to "E."

As if by magic, the book fell open to a full-page advertisement:

METAFICTIONAL PEST CONTROL SERVICES
SAFE, EFFECTIVE CONTROL SINCE 1455
•RADIOACTIVE INSECTS
•INTELLIGENT RODENTS
•VAMPIRE BATS IN ALL THEIR FORMS
FREE ESTIMATES, WRITTEN GUARANTEES.

* * * *

The exterminator arrived within the hour. He appeared to be a middle-aged man with a craggy, weathered face that seemed permanently sunk in an expression of gloom. "Metafictional Extermination," he drawled when Maddie opened the door. "Hear you've got a problem with the basement. You'll have to invite me in."

Terrified that he might leave if she said anything, Maddie marched the man down the stairs. There was now a palpable sense of menace attached to the bottom of the stairwell. The door handle glinted in a decidedly eldritch manner.

Opening the door, the exterminator gazed upon the untold horrors of time and space. "Yeah, you've got some nasty transdimensional beasties in there," he said. "Looks like one of those pulp magazine jobs." He clicked some more buttons on a peculiar bronze machine on his wrist. "Surprised you're still here. Most people who meet up with them Dark Gods go crazy. Can't take the violation of the laws of science."

"I was never good at science," Maddie said. "Can you fix it? Can you get rid of them?"

"Oh, we can get rid of *them* no problem," the exterminator said, pushing the door shut. "But you've got a problem with this here house. How long have you been living here?"

"A year," Maddie said guiltily, thinking of the as-yet-unpacked cardboard boxes in the kitchen and living room.

"Yeah," the exterminator continued, "it's an Old House, see. Built on a reality fault. You'll get strange critters manifesting here sometimes."

Maddie sighed in relief. The Dark Gods had not come for the garbage after all.

"Payment is one lock of hair, Miss," the exterminator said, pulling up a face mask.

Maddie, who had been nervously flicking her mother's credit card against her fingers, stopped. "What do you mean?"

"Lock of hair," the exterminator said. His eyes glittered. "Standard price for this kind of job." As Maddie hesitated he added, "Now, you don't want to deal with these beasties by yourself, do you? Taking over your mind, melting the furniture.

Cheap price, when you consider your options."

Maddie wasn't convinced. The man was talking the way Sam did when she wanted Maddie to just shut up and agree with her.

"Um," she said, thinking fast. There was something she'd read in English class about giving away locks of hair. Something bad. "Can I think about it?"

The man screwed up his face. Now that he was up close, Maddie found herself feeling uncomfortable. She slid her arm over to the scorched broom and curled her hand around it.

"Offer's been made," the man said, looming. Really, Maddie wasn't that sure he was a man at all. "Accept, or no?"

"Um," Maddie said, "...no?"

The man glared at her, then tipped his hat, and vanished. There was no fuss about it, no flash of light or explosion of smoke.

"That's okay," Maddie whispered to herself. Her hands were shaking. "At least he didn't mess up the carpet."

She checked to make sure the door was shut, and went back upstairs to the kitchen. She slumped in a chair, shaking the remains of the Doritos package onto the table. She'd been so excited when the exterminator came. She'd been so sure everything was going to work out. But he hadn't helped, and her friends hadn't helped, and her parents couldn't help, so really, what could Maddie do? She was but a loathsome worshiper of Cthulhu, a misbegotten wretch who—

"Okay, that's it!" Maddie slammed her fist down and glared at the wall. "I don't even like Lovecraft, okay? Too many big words! *Nobody* knows what they mean. I bet—I bet not even *Lovecraft* knows what they mean! It's stupid, and the shog—shoggy—the penguins are *not that scary!*"

The house was silent. Smoke curled up from the melted linoleum. On the fridge, the letter magnets the chaos had moved seemed to resolve themselves into some kind of meaning. YES THEY ARE, they spelled.

Maddie threw the book at the fridge. Magnetized letters scattered across the floor.

"I didn't even read Jenny's book right!" she yelled. "Lovecraft didn't *call* them Dark Gods, that's just—"

Maddie stopped. She looked at the paperback lying on the floor, lurid type blazing upwards.

"Manifest *this*," she said, and went looking for a permanent marker.

Half an hour later Maddie had an edited volume of Lovecraft in her hands. She'd crossed out most of the threatening adjectives and added nicer ones in the margins. At the end of the book she wrote in capital letters:

AND THEN THE DARK GODS GOT TIRED OF MADDIE'S BASEMENT AND WENT HOME. EVERYONE LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER. THE END.

She closed the book and shook it vigorously, in case magic worked the same way as hair dye or salad dressing. Then she went down to check the basement.

The doorknob no longer looked eldritch. If anything, it looked vaguely ashamed of itself. Maddie pushed the chair aside on the landing and flung the door open.

Nothing. An ordinary basement stared back at her.

"Good," Maddie said. "Let's keep it that way."

And so Maddie was left alone. There were no more noises from the walls. There were no more Dark Gods in the basement. The Lovecraft books were now sitting out on the porch in a plastic bag. True, the kitchen linoleum had gone green in places and was smoking slightly, but Maddie was sure that could be fixed with a bit of soap and paper towels. All in all, she thought with a growing sense of pride, she'd done okay.

As a reward, she grabbed herself an ice cream bar from the kitchen, and sat down in front of the television. A new episode of *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* was on, this one promising a shocking twist involving a snake and a former hotdog-eating champion. But after the day she'd had, Maddie couldn't help but feel that the celebrities didn't really understand what hardship was. "Stop crying," she admonished the blond reality actress whose battery-operated hairdryer had shorted out onscreen. "That hairdryer's gone. You'll be fine without it."

"Nevermore," agreed a harsh voice. Twisting around on the couch, Maddie saw that a large black bird had taken up residence on the bookcase.

"You can wait," she said, and went back to watching the show.

About the Author:

Von Carr was last seen disappearing into the wilds of Delaware to launch her plans for world conquest. She leaves behind some of her stories at magazines like Fantasy, On Spec, and InterGalactic Medicine Show, as well as a melting Ice Lair and a bizarre, duck-shaped machine that spits out parking tickets in the language of the Elder Gods. The world's top scientists have yet to discover the purpose behind any of this.

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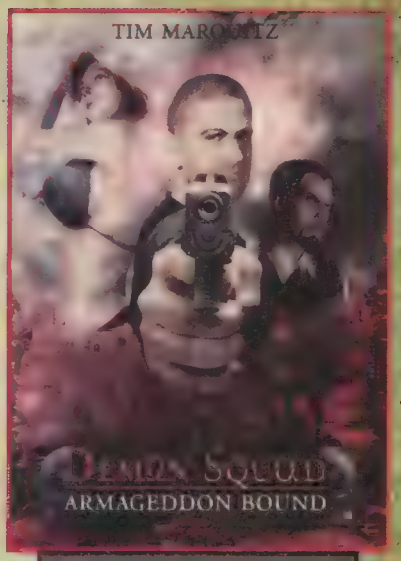


Armageddon Bound
eBook ISBN: 9781615720019
Print ISBN: 9781615720002
Dark Urban Fantasy

Mr. Marquitz writes with such vivid imagery that I found myself getting a little bit "green about the gills" during a number of scenes. —Book Wenches

Skulls
eBook ISBN: 9781615723539
Print ISBN: 9781615723546
Young Adult
Dark Urban Fantasy

Sepulchral Earth Series

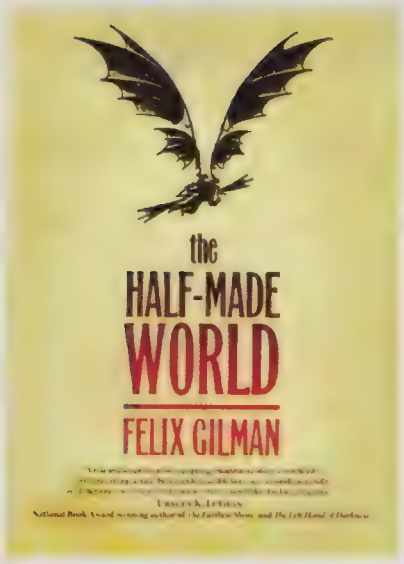
The Long Road

The Temple of the Dead

Books

by Paul Witcover and Elizabeth Bear

Felix Gilman's ***The Half-Made World*** **(Tor, hardcover, 482 pages, $25.99, ISBN: 978-0-7653-2552-5)** more than fulfills the promise of his brilliantly original first novel, *Thunderer*. That novel was one of the most impressive debuts I've had the privilege of reviewing, and though its sequel, *Gears of the City*, was less successful, it did nothing to detract from the impression of an exceptionally gifted young writer already working at a very high level. *The Half-Made World*, which inaugurates a new series, is a quantum leap forward. It is a work of exhilarating imaginative exuberance and creativity that seamlessly fuses elements of steampunk, New Weird, Old West, sword-and-sorcery, and other genres into something that is both familiar and distinctively original. At times, I was reminded of K. J. Parker's devastatingly bleak mechanistic fantasies; at other times, of Cormac McCarthy's violent yet hauntingly elegiac Western mythologies and, perhaps because I recently watched the Coen Brothers' remake, of *True Grit*, with its unromantic view of the Old West, its unsentimental take on heroism and sacrifice and revenge. But mostly I wasn't thinking of other writers or novels as I read; my attention was utterly absorbed in Gilman's world, his language, his characters.



Gilman's central conceit, reflected in his title, is that some parts of his world are newer than others. The East is ancient, civilized, peaceful. The West—which he presents as analogous to the American West of the late nineteenth century—is, or so it is suggested, no more than three hundred years old, volatile, unfixed, a battleground between two supernatural entities awakened by human pioneers. And the farther west one goes, the more primordial and malleable is the stuff of reality; even the two great supernatural powers of the West fear what may come out of the unmade lands beyond them.

While Gilman's first two novels featured a large and at times confusing cast of characters, with a corresponding welter of plot lines, here he has narrowed his focus, trimmed his lines. The extra measure of control gives *The Half-Made World* a tautness and momentum absent from its more meandering predecessors. There are but three main characters: Dr. Liv Alverhuysen, a widowed psychologist from the civilized East; John Creedmore, a jaded gunslinger who unwillingly serves an anarchic confederation of demonic entities that house themselves in magical guns and, through those guns, or, as they are memorably termed at one point, "temples of metal and wood and deadly power," imbue the men and women who wield them with enhanced strength, longevity, and other physical benefits—at a price; and Sub-Invigilator (Third) Lowry of the Army of the Angelus Engine, an emotionally stunted, ambitious bureaucrat who eagerly and fearfully serves immortal entities determined to bring the world under the domination of their own mechanistic, hyper-rational, obsessively ordered (and hence insane) minds.

Creedmore and those like him are known as Agents of the Gun; Lowry serves the Engines of the Line, thirty-eight sentient locomotive-like machines linked by a network of train tracks that functions as a kind of nervous system. There can be no peace between the Gun and the Line, embodiments as they are of raw chaos and ruthless order; in the long-term, the Line seems destined to prevail, but the Gun is not going down without a fight; meanwhile, in between them, both human beings and an aboriginal humanoid species known as the First Folk suffer collateral damage.

Alverhuysen, Creedmore, and Lowry orbit a fourth character: General Orlan Enver, once a military genius, now a shattered old man in whose broken mind resides a great secret—a secret of the First Folk that is both feared and desired by the Agents of the Gun and the Engines of the Line, for whichever of them possesses it will possess the power to destroy the other. Yet if a third party should gain the secret first, the Gun and the Line would be equally at risk of destruction. Now, suddenly, more than twelve years after his sanity was annihilated by a mind-bomb while fleeing servants of the Line on the way to claim this secret from "a cave in the red navel of the world," the general's whereabouts have come to light.

For all that time, he has been an anonymous patient at a hospital called the House Dolorous, located on the very border of the unmade lands, a neutral place of healing under the protection of a "small god" that permits no violence within its walls; any act of violence, however small, meets a fatal reply. It is to the House Dolorous that the young widow Dr. Alverhuysen comes, accepting a position originally offered to her husband; her motivation for taking the job, and making the long journey from the East, which is tedious

and dangerous in equal measure, is unclear to her, but readers can see that she is desperate to throw off the stultifying shroud of respectability and predictability that she has unwittingly come to wear since even before the death of her much older husband; readers may also detect an unseen hand other than the author's influencing her actions, but that is more hinted at than made explicit in this volume.

Creedmore, meanwhile, has been commanded by Marmion to extricate the general from the hospital and bring him to a place where he can be properly interrogated. Creedmore manages to insert himself into the hospital without coming to the attention of its guardian; but before he can abscond with the general, forces of the Line, under the command of Lowry, appear—for the Engines, too, have received intelligence of the general and what may yet be excavated from the ruins of his mind.

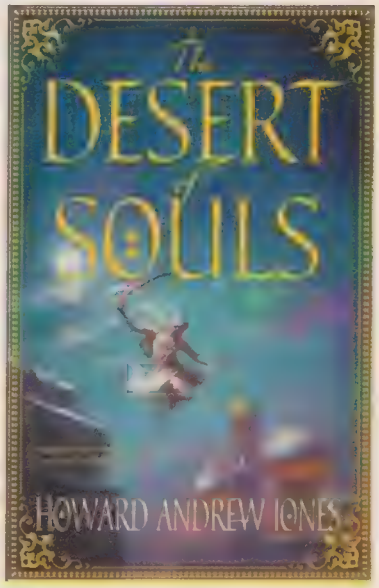
Creedmore, who has all the cunning of a confidence man, succeeds in escaping with the general . . . and Dr. Alverhuysen. This unlikely trio, cut off from the relative safety lying to the east, where the Gun has reinforcements, are compelled to flee from Lowry deeper into the unmade lands. Lowry, who dares not disappoint his own inhuman masters, must follow.

But for all the bizarre encounters of their flight across the unmade lands, all the violent confrontations, the mysteries solved and introduced, what stands out is the relationship that evolves between Creedmore and his prisoner, Alverhuysen. Although at one point Creedmore says that "the Gun takes only the worst and the wickedest," Creedmore is not inherently wicked but is rather a cowardly, easily corrupted man who, as an Agent of the Gun, has been seduced into evil, and who retains sufficient pride and self-awareness to be ashamed of his subjugation, even though he is powerless to resist it save through petty acts of insubordination. He is also capable of humor and charm and even an idiosyncratic chivalry. His silent exchanges with his master Marmion are delightful and chilling by turns, the sort of conversations that one imagines Elric might have had with Stormbringer had Elric possessed a sense of humor and Stormbringer been more loquacious. That aspect of this novel is pure gold. But even better is Gilman's portrayal of Dr. Alverhuysen's transformation, while a prisoner of Creedmore, and a target of the Line, into a woman as formidable in her way as any of the inhuman entities who are hunting her. It was here that I found myself thinking of Mattie and Rooster Cogburn from *True Grit*, because grit is a quality the good doctor comes to possess in spades.

The Old West is much in vogue these days among fantasy writers, but Gilman has outdone them all. Though he resolves little in this volume, his accomplishment is nevertheless of the very first rank. I will be surprised—and disappointed—not to see *The Half-Made World* as an award finalist.

—Review by Paul Witcover

Howard Jones's ***The Desert of Souls*** **(Thomas Dunne Books, hardcover, 320 pages, $28.99, ISBN: 978-0-312-64674-5)** is a smart and loving homage to an all-but-forgotten pulp master as well as being an accomplished first novel in its own right. The jacket copy calls the book "a thrilling, inventive cross between *One Thousand and One Nights* and Sherlock Holmes," and though jacket copy is almost always rank hyperbole, in this case you can believe the hype. I would add Robert E. Howard, Edgar Allen Poe, and Fritz Lieber to the mix. But paramount among the many influences this assured novel wears without ostentation is Harold Lamb (1892-1962), a writer for pulps and Hollywood whose fictions combined a zest for adventure with meticulous historical authenticity and an unusual—for the time—appreciation of non-Western cultures. His characters—male and female—are products of their time and place yet also individuals struggling within those confines, including gender confines, to achieve the fullest expression of their capacity to live and love. Jones, editor of *Black Gate* magazine, is a Lamb scholar who has painstakingly shepherded the works of Lamb back into to print, and his own writing reflects the best historical and humanistic qualities of his literary master . . . with the addition of fantastic elements that fall squarely within the pulp tradition while, at the same time, reflecting a more contemporary appreciation of those tropes. Which is to say that Jones admires the work of his predecessors but is not mired in it; like steampunk writers who have brought a fresh sensibility to a genre that had once been consigned to the literary junkyard, Jones gives the tired landscape of sword and sorcery a modern makeover whose relevance to our own terror-infected times, while not overt or didactic, is inescapable.



The novel is set in and around Baghdad in the late eighth century, a time when the power of Constantinople was still to be reckoned with in the Middle East, though that empire was riven by internal controversies, tantamount to civil

war, over the outlawing of religious icons. This political strife, though taking place far from Baghdad, nevertheless plays a part in Jones's wide-flung yet tautly controlled plot, in which a mystical maguffin, in the form of ancient door pulls capable of opening a portal into "the land of the djinn," is sought by a renegade Greek necromancer, Demetrios, and a Magian priest/sorcerer, Firouz, who join forces to destroy Baghdad and the Caliphate.

The accidental protectors of the Caliphate, and the heroes of this novel, who follow ably in the fictional footsteps of such derring-duos as Holmes and Watson, Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, and Aubrey and Maturin, are Dabir ibn Khalil, a scholar in the household of Jaffar, the Caliph's closest friend, and Asim el Abbas, the twenty-five-year-old captain of Jaffar's guard. These two men, thrown together by chance or fate, begin as reluctant allies, each suspicious of the other, and with good reason, but end as comrades and friends. Dabir is Holmes-like in his deductive abilities, a man of science in a culture where magic and superstition hold sway, yet whose allegiance to science is based less on reason than on a moral rejection of magic, the evil effects of which he has experienced first-hand. Asim is strong and brave but headstrong, a skilled swordsman but not a strategic thinker or an introspective man; he, too, has prior experience of magic, though his reaction to it is closer to that of Conan than of Conan Doyle.

But that experience has not prepared either of them for what they stumble into one day while taking their feckless master, the youthful Jabbar, on an incognito expedition into the colorful streets of Baghdad. There, seeking diversion, they visit a fortune-teller who informs Dabir that he will become a slayer of monsters and protector of the Caliphate, Asim that he will become a writer of renown, and Jaffar that he will lose his head for daring to love a woman above his station. For obvious reasons, Jaffar is displeased with his portion of the prophecy; he convinces himself, and attempts to convince the others, that the fortune-teller must have mixed up their futures. Thus Jaffar, who fancies himself something of a raconteur, is obviously the one destined to attain fame as a storyteller. Asim, the soldier, must be the monster-slayer. As for Dabir—well, among his other duties, he is the tutor to Jaffar's beautiful and brilliant niece, eighteen-year-old Sabirah, making him the only logical candidate for forbidden love and decapitation. Dabir, understandably, is less than happy with this interpretation...especially when, in order to remove all temptation, and thus keep Dabir's head on his shoulders, Jaffar magnanimously decides to dismiss the man from his service—casually condemning him to a life of poverty and disgrace, for no other noble is apt to hire a man whom Jaffar, the Caliph's favorite, has cast off. Readers, however, are informed as clearly as possible, short of being told flat-out, that the prophecies are correctly targeted by the fact that the novel is presented in the first person, with Asim as narrator; and one of the pleasures of this novel is to watch the prophecies inexorably, if not always predictably, click into place. This is typical of Jones's knack for unobtrusively conveying important information to readers, and it's a talent that serves him, and us, in good stead throughout.

On their way back to Jaffar's palace, the trio becomes embroiled in what at first seems a common theft but soon takes a grander and more mysterious shape—the shape of an ancient door pull fashioned of solid gold and marked with arcane symbols that even Dabir is hard-pressed to decipher. The plot thickens when three Greek merchants come to the palace, bearing gifts and seeking the door pull, which they claim was stolen from them before they could bring it to the Caliph, who, or so it is rumored, possesses a similar door pull. Asim and Dabir discover that this is so, and fetch the Caliph's treasure back to Jaffar's palace, to compare the two artifacts—whereupon they are attacked by demonic creatures . . . and the flavor of the novel deepens from a sharp mix of mystery and adventure to eerie dark fantasy and horror. It is a sudden and effective shift that Jones maintains for the remainder of the book.

Soon enough the door pulls are stolen, and Asim and Dabir are dispatched by Jaffar to retrieve them. Thus begins a long and harrowing game of cat and mouse across the deserts and down the rivers of the Middle East, with Asim and Dabir barely holding their own against Firouz and Demetrios, evil adversaries skilled in the eldritch arts. Accompanying them is Jaffar's court poet, Hamil, a foil to the blunt Asim who delights in pricking the soldier with his sharp wit, and, to everyone's surprise, Sabirah. Sabirah's presence is discovered at a point when to turn back would be to give up all hope of retrieving the door pulls, by which time it is clear to Dabir at least that the fate of the Caliphate hinges upon the recovery of these items. Thus, although, given all that has gone before, Sabirah's presence can only confirm, in the eyes of the suspicious Jaffar, an illicit love between teacher and pupil, Dabir decides to continue the quest rather than returning Sabirah to her uncle. It is a fateful choice.

What really distinguishes Jones's novel is not his technical skill or his compulsively readable plot, or even his sure grasp of Middle Eastern

mythology—to which he imparts a moldering, Poe-like menace and, once our heroes enter the land of the djinn (to reveal that they do so is no spoiler but rather an inducement), a cosmically Lovecraftian spin—but rather his sensitive portrayal of his characters and their relationships. He makes readers believe that Asim, a man of action whose thoughts are apt to be ruled by emotion and convention rather than reason and introspection, nevertheless develops into a perspicacious writer of real if limited gifts. Jones presents his narrator faithfully, with all his limitations as a man and a storyteller, and yet reveals depths in Asim and, especially, in other characters, that Asim himself may not initially or fully perceive. Asim's exposure to things outside his narrow experience—whether in the realm of the supernatural or in the equally wondrous and dangerous realms of the human heart—forces a change upon him, a slow deepening of character and a corresponding opening of his plodding mind and impulsive heart. Similarly, Dabir is changed as much by his acquaintance with Sabirah and Asim as by his uncanny encounters with djinn and necromancy and other things stranger still. And Sabirah—most poignantly of all—gains a newfound and hard-won maturity that, within the constraints of her culture, is both ennobling and tragic. Even Jones's villains are, for the most part, three-dimensional characters—especially Firouz, whose pursuit of vengeance, while metastasized into a cancer that has already consumed him and threatens to spread into the wider world, nevertheless began in a stark and unremedied injustice perpetrated by representatives of the Caliph.

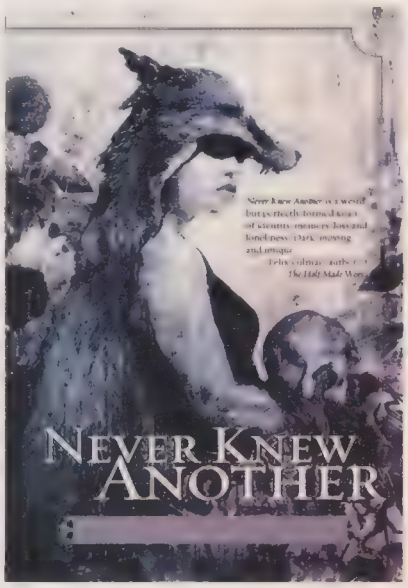
I am no fortune-teller, but this superior historical fantasy augurs well for the futures of Dabir and Asim . . . and Howard Jones.

—Review by Paul Witcover

J. M. McDermott's first novel, *The Last Dragon*, made my best-of-the-year list for 2008. It was an exceptionally literate, gracefully written fantasy whose impressionistic structure reflected the fractured mental state of its narrator and thus required effort to piece together correctly . . . but repaid that effort with interest. Now comes his second novel, ***Never Knew Another*** **(Night Shade Books, trade paperback, 240 pages, $14.99, ISBN: 978-1-59780-215-4),** the first book in the Dogsland Trilogy. It's more of a mixed bag, though still a challenging, engrossing, and ultimately rewarding piece of work. I had the sense as I read along that McDermott's complex and audacious narrative strategy could not be fully discerned, much less judged a success or failure, on the basis of this book but would require at least the next volume before any legitimate evaluation could be made. So while I describe that central aspect of the novel below, I'm going to withhold judgment on it for now.

McDermott has a flair for subtle world-building. His fantasy settings and associated systems, cultural, magical, and otherwise, are as integral to his novels as his plots and characters; indeed, the three are so tightly interwoven as to be aspects of the same thing. Characters and their motivations cannot be understood in isolation from the context of their cultures and the history of their worlds. Ideally, this should be true of every novel, but many fantasies, especially, possess a cookie-cutter feel, with settings and characters and plots that are already so familiar as to require little or no exegesis. That's not the case here. *Never Knew Another* is one of those rare fantasies that must not only be read, it must be deciphered, translated, absorbed. In short, learned. Those are the fantasies that stick with me, that I keep coming back to, and that I keep searching for as a reader.

McDermott's setting may at first seem familiar to readers, and in fact, superficially, it *is* familiar—incorporating many of the tropes of mainstream fantasy, such as shape-changers, demons, and a quasi-medieval social and political order, among others. But underneath, it's full of surprises.



A city, Woodsland, is surrounded by countryside and forest. The city folk—common laborers and thieves at the bottom of the pecking order, and aristocrats (who may also be thieves) at the top—worship a god called Imam. Out in the countryside, a different order prevails. There the goddess Erin—who, or so her followers believe, gave all living things the simple tasks of eating, sleeping, and loving, and then, for reasons as yet unclear to readers, cursed humanity with sufficient intelligence to get in the way of all three—holds sway. Her priests and priestesses are Walkers—human beings who, through the power of the goddess, can take on the shape of wolves, gaining strength, speed, and a wisdom otherwise inaccessible to humans.

Imam and Erin are deities whose followers accord each other respect even as they remain within the fixed boundaries of their respective faiths, which intersect but rarely, or so it seems. One area of intersection involves the seed of Elishta—children born to parents corrupted by demon blood. It can be inferred that Elishta was once a deity like Erin and Imam, only for reasons as yet unexplained has been demoted to a less

exalted if still potent status in the pantheon, as the source of evil in the world.

The Walkers of Erin and the priests of Imam are tasked with expunging the seed of Elishta. Their most holy mission, in other words, is genocide. But it is not always easy to tell demonspawn from normal humans, especially nowadays, when their numbers have been whittled almost to nothing, and those that do survive, out of fear and self-preservation, seek not to prey on human beings but only to escape them or, failing that, live unremarked among them. Yet the seed of Elishta do have distinguishing characteristics. Their blood is highly acidic and poisonous to all living things; the same is true, to a lesser degree, of their saliva, sweat, and, presumably, other bodily fluids. They cannot sleep. And they are almost always born with some physical deformity that marks them as demonic: scales, claws, hooves, wings, and so on. Still, with care, foresight, and luck, a demonspawn can survive undetected indefinitely, even until death or beyond, though the decomposition of the body, and its attendant poisoning of all the surrounding area, is the ultimate giveaway.

Never Knew Another opens with the discovery of a demon's body by two Walkers, a husband and wife whose names "cannot be pronounced without a wolf's tongue" and hence remain nameless throughout the novel. The woman becomes one of McDermott's two primary narrative voices. It is through her that readers learn about this world and come to know Jona Lord Joni, the city guardsman whose broken body yields up its secrets to the magic of Erin. Thanks to that magic, the woman gains total access to every memory and associated emotion of the dead demonspawn, and thus gains knowledge of the existence of two other demons: one, a young woman, Rachel Nolander, Jona's lover, and the other a city thief named Salvatore. The two Walkers are obliged to track down and kill Rachel and Salvatore, and eliminate any trace of their taint, and so they head for Woodsland—or, as it is known contemptuously in the language of the wolves, Dogsland.

Her mystic union with Jona's essence allows the Walker to relive his memories as if they are happening in real time—and this is the narrative mechanism, a sort of enhanced system of flashbacks, by which McDermott tells much of his story, which, we soon realize, is both a mystery and a love story. The mystery is not the identity of the demons, which we learn quickly enough, but instead the identity of an underworld boss known as the Night King, a criminal mastermind who somehow learns of Jona's true nature and uses that knowledge to blackmail him into becoming an enforcer and murderer. A greater mystery is the origin and nature of the seeds of Elishta, for though the Walkers and others take it for granted that the demonspawn are evil, as do many of the demonspawn themselves—certainly Jona comes to believe this about himself, and not without reason—their persecuted status can be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Jona's lover, Rachel, does not believe that she is inherently evil, only different, and she endeavors to harm no one, only to protect herself and her older brother, Djoss, a normal human who generally acts as her protector and the family breadwinner. But she is severely disfigured, with patches of scales instead of skin, and a forked tongue, which forces her to stay hidden as much as possible. Yet somehow she and Jona meet and fall in love—Jona, who has never known another like himself (hence the novel's title), is at least partially redeemed by suddenly being able to share the burden of his secret with another person. Only then, perhaps inevitably, things go terribly wrong—though we don't yet know how, only that they do, because, after all, Jona is dead and Rachel is fled. All we know is that Jona has somehow given his life for her—which, the Walker confesses pointedly, as if to underscore the contrasts between these two couples, is more than her own husband would do for her.

This is obviously not a straightforward way of telling a story. We have a nameless narrator, who is almost certainly prejudiced and hence unreliable on a number of levels, and who is also our sole access point to one of the main characters, Jona, whom she regards, rightly or wrongly, as evil and inhuman. Though we seem to be getting direct and uncensored views of the events of Jona's past, as he remembers them, we should keep in mind that Jona's memories are themselves suspect, even before being strained, as it were, through the Walker's discriminating filter. McDermott complicates matters by introducing another narrative thread—this one ostensibly more straightforward, less mystical: namely, sections which relate events involving Rachel that could not be known to Jona, and hence not to the Walker, and thus must be either presented as traditional third-person narration or are the memories of the dead Rachel communicated via another Walker whose identity we don't know as yet. This latter is unlikely, I admit, but the possibility is there, and only future volumes of the trilogy can clear up the question.

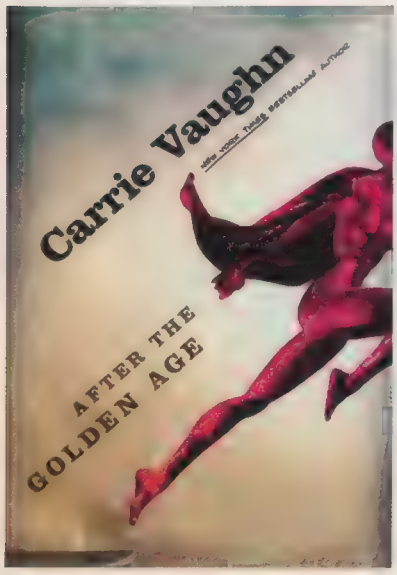
What's certain now is that these Rachel-oriented sections, more or less told from her point of view, do not balance the other sections

of the novel, which are, so to speak, weighted with two consciousnesses: the Walker's and Jona's imperfectly fused together. Rachel is an intriguing character. Despite her physical deformities, she is kind and gentle but not timid. She is, in addition, a Senta, a follower of a spiritual philosophy that confers some magical powers along with more meditative benefits. Yet McDermott does not make the most of her in this novel. That seems less an oversight than a strategy. What I am hoping is that the next volume of the trilogy goes deeper beneath the surface of Rachel's perspective and faith and, in the process, gives readers a moral authority to counter that of the Walkers, whose faith admits no ambiguity. And indeed there are hints that this may be where McDermott is heading. I will follow him without hesitation.

—Review by Paul Witcover

Although she is best-known for her "Kitty" novels--about a late-night radio call-in host who caters to the supernatural--Carrie Vaughn embarks upon something of a departure in ***After the Golden Age*** **(Tor Books, hardcover, 308 pages, $24.99, ISBN 978-0-76532-555-6).** In this book, she introduces us to Celia West, the estranged daughter of the world's most powerful superhumans. Celia is a normal human twenty-something, and she hasn't lived with her dysfunctional (and superpowered) parents in years.

She does her crime-fighting as a forensic accountant. And endures with poor grace her role as a frequent kidnap victim in the mold of Jimmy Olsen, Robin, Lois Lane, and other perennial super-hostages. But when her boss pushes her to get involved in the accounting investigation and trial of the city's most notorious super-villain, the Destructor, some of the skeletons in Celia's own closet are in danger of emerging.



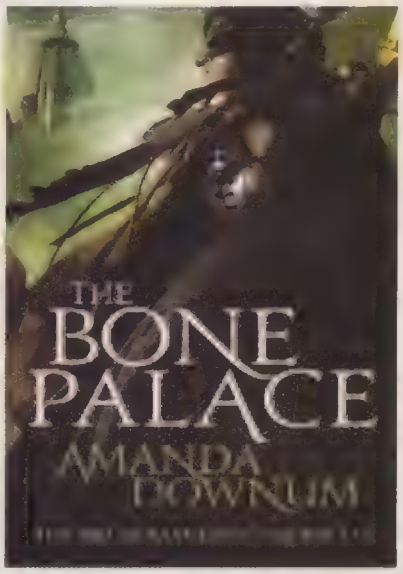
For the comic-book fan, this is a delightful book--full of in-jokes and snarky observances on what life is like for the baseline human attempting to maneuver through a world of cosmic powers. How do you survive when you're just some guy, and you're surrounded by people who throw buildings around?

Celia herself hits the right balance of sarcastic and independent without being the sort of person you'd hate to be stuck in an elevator (or a novel) with, and the book manages to balance courtroom drama, romance complicated by parental secret identities, friendship complicated by the secret identities of friends, and the occasional (or more-than-occasional) kidnapping with good grace and humor, all without ever collapsing into slapstick.

Vaughn is not a particularly literary writer, but her style is readable and light. I enjoyed this book a great deal.

—Review by Elizabeth Bear

Moving from forensic accountancy to forensic necromancy, we have Amanda Downum's second novel, ***The Bone Palace*** **(Orbit, mass market paperback, 480 pages, $7.99, ISBN 978-0-31606-900-7).** *The Bone Palace* takes place in the same world and continuity as *The Drowned City,* but several years later and a goodly distance away. Isyllt Iskaldur, the forensic necromancer mentioned above, has returned home to her native city of Erisín--and the service of her mentor and estranged lover.



Still an agent of the crown, she and a colorful cast of secondary characters are drawn into twin mysteries: the robbery of a dead queen's tomb, and the murder of a young prostitute, Forsythia. These are linked together when the queen's signet ring is found sewn into the hem of Forsythia's garment.

Meanwhile, a martial princess and the prince's mistress must combine forces to protect the royal family from a series of assassination attempts, and Isyllt's quest will eventually bring her into the tombs and sewers below the city where the vampiric vrykoloi dwell. And over the entire city, a dead palace--haunted by the ghosts of an ancient massacre--broods, radiating toxic energy.

Downum's style is lush and evocative, and Erisín emerges as one of the more richly-drawn cities of fantasy. It might take a few more novels to bring it to the same undeniable life as a Lankhmar, but the potential is undeniable. I want to come back here, and spend a good long time.

—Review by Elizabeth Bear

Paranormal Romance & Urban Fantasy

by Elizabeth Bear

It's perhaps unfair to class Jo Walton's ***Among Others*** **(Tor Books, hardcover, 304 pages, $24.99, ISBN 978-0-76532-153-4)** as an urban fantasy. Which is to say it's definitely fantasy, but there's nothing particularly urban about it. It is, however, more or less contemporary, taking place in Wales and England in the 1970's, and since "urban" if often used as a catchall phrase for fantasy in modern dress, I think it qualifies. Among Others is an accessible and unusual book--a fictionalized memoir, or perhaps more fairly a novel strongly influenced by personal experience, it's the story of a Welsh teenager who loves speculative fiction growing up and attending a boarding school in England.

But it's also more than that, because Mor (the teenager in question) is also at the nexus of a series of apparent paranormal events. She's the lone survivor of a pair of twins; she was crippled and her sister killed when they opposed their mother, and abusive witch. Mor has taken her sister's nickname, and the apparent conflict in the book revolves around Mor trying to find a place for herself among conflicting worlds of strangers.

Her father (now her guardian) is in the thrall of her sisters, who Mor also suspects of witchcraft. Her mother (a borderline personality if ever the portrait of one was painted in literature) is still stalking her. The girls at the boarding school don't like Mor much, and she spends a good deal of her time immersed in what are now the classics of the New Wave.

One of the things I loved best about this book was that it's possible to read the text from several angles. For example, it's possible everything Mor tells us is real, that the faeries she sees exist and the magic spells she works really change the world retroactively. It's also possible to read her as a compulsive liar, a terribly unreliable narrator. And last, but perhaps more intriguingly, there's the possibility that Mor is a very high-functioning schizophrenic, and all the magic and conspiracy she sees is the result of hallucinations and paranoid ideations.

I wish I had been able to review this book for my previous column, because it would have been delightful to contrast Mor and Gill, from Freda Warrington's Midsummer Night. Both are intriguing female protagonists disabled by car accidents, and it's interesting to read their books in context with one another.

For intriguing worldbuilding, it's hard to beat Holly Black's ***Red Glove*** **(Margaret K. McElderry, hardcover, 336 pages, $17.99, ISBN 978-1-44240-339-0),** the second in her Curse Worker series (following last year's *White Cat*), which takes place in a parallel world very similar to our own, if you ignore the ability of many humans to cast curses through skin to skin contact. The protagonists and antagonists of this novel, however, cannot afford to ignore that fact--it drives their every action, and so many of the baseline attitudes of the world they live in.

There's a touch of allegory in here--the curse workers are criminals from birth, whether they ever use their powers intentionally or not--and the way they stay closeted and are feared and sought and glamorized by their baseline peers reminds me very much of media images of homosexuality.

However, Black does a good job of never letting that parallel become oppressive. Also, she is largely successful in balancing the needs and desires of her teenaged protagonist, who comes across in most ways as a very smart and believable kid, with the demands of the plot. Except in one spot, where I felt that Cassel was being unnecessarily idiotic in order to drive the plot.

It wasn't a wall-bouncing offense, however, and the book has a great deal to recommend it nevertheless.

And the pace definitely picks up as young grifter (and struggling student) Cassel begins investigating his own family mysteries--and dealing with a curse-worker, con-artist mother and brother who are only marginally less manipulative and destructive than Mor's mother in *Among Others*.

In general, *Red Gloves* is maybe a little structurally more wobbly than *White Cat*, but it shares a lot of the earlier books' strengths. It has an engaging protagonist and supporting cast, a series of ethically knotty problems to solve, and a doomed romance. In addition, poor Cassel is generally as smart as he is hapless (which is why that one moment of idiot plot stands out so violently) and he's definitely an active protagonist. Overall, I'd say this is a strong book, interesting and different.

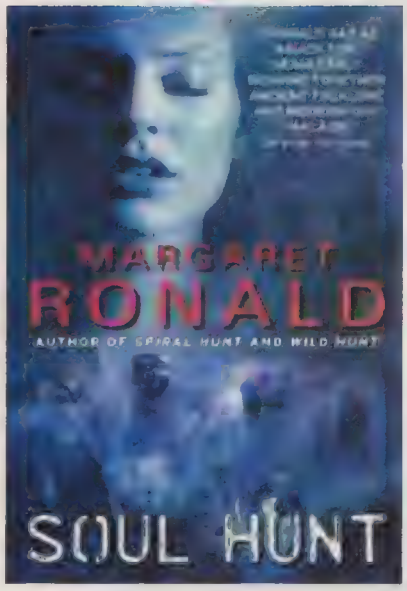
A book that much more classically fits the urban fantasy mold is Margaret Ronald's ***Soul Hunt*** **(Eos, mass market paperback, 320 pages, $7.99, ISBN 978-0-06166-243-0),** the third in the series (following *Spiral Hunt* and *Wild Hunt*) focusing on the misadventures of Evie Scelan, Hound--a descendent of figures out of myth, blessed (or cursed) with certain canine attributes. This book picks up with Evie seriously injured from the troubles that ended Book Two, and struggling to keep her new relationship honest in the wake of a near-death experience and an unexpected sacrifice.

Over the course of the novel, Evie must prevent yet another plot that could result in grave damage to the city she defends, and she must do this while weakened, struggling, and perhaps under sentence of death. Her situation is complicated by the developing seer's powers of her lover Nate's young, orphaned sister Katie, to whom Evie serves as a sort of guardian, and Nate's own paternal-line curse.

I found this book a bit muddy compared to the first two: there seemed to me to be a good deal less clarity in Evie's choice of actions and directions, or even the choices of the bad guys, and the climax felt curiously off-center. However, it was nice to see Evie's posse of weird semi-supernaturals developing some additional agency and outside lives, some of which serve as foils to Evie and her occasionally radical behavior--at least for a time. And the action and tension don't let up.

I greatly enjoyed Ronald's use of some of the finer details of New England's rich and weird history--the books in this series have a great sense of place. I'm old enough that "urban fantasy" still means, to me, books that have some kind of love affair with a modern city, and the Evie Scelan novels certainly qualify. If anything, I'd quibble that Ronald (and Evie) know Boston so well that they don't always pause to evoke setting enough--a little more description would be nice.

Despite its sense of being structurally a bit off-balance, this is an enjoyable novel.



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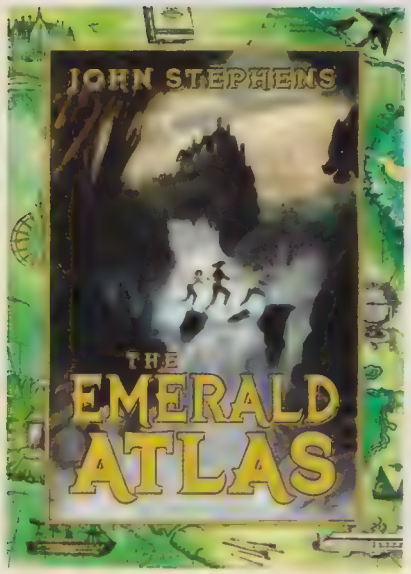
Young Adult Fiction

by Michael Jones

***The Emerald Atlas*, by John Stephens, (Alfred A. Knopf, hardcover, 432 pages, $17.99, ISBN 978-0-375-86870-2)**



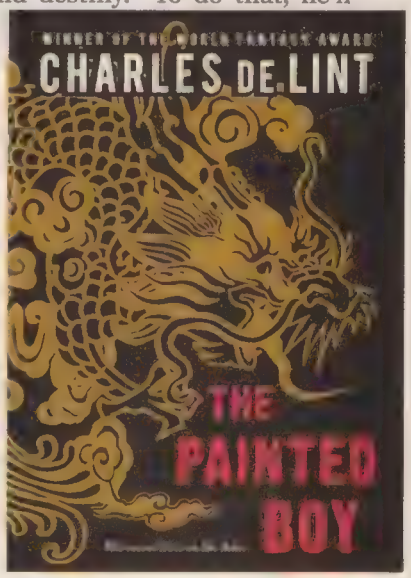
Ever since their parents' disappearance ten years ago, Kate, Michael and Emma have bounced from one orphanage to the next, ultimately ending up at the remote home of the eccentric Dr. Stanislaus Pym. There, they discover a strange green book which launches them on a series of time-jumping adventures involving an immortal Countess, an imperiled town, and a hidden dwarven kingdom. As the siblings affect past and present, they discover just why they've been drawn into what promises to be an epic struggle between good and evil. Ambitious, entertaining, magical and whimsical, this marks a strong beginning to a new trilogy, invoking just a little Harry Potter and Series of Unfortunate Events along the way.

***The Iron Queen*, by Julie Kagawa, (Harlequin Teen, trade paperback, 368 pages, $9.99, ISBN 978-0-373-21018-3)**

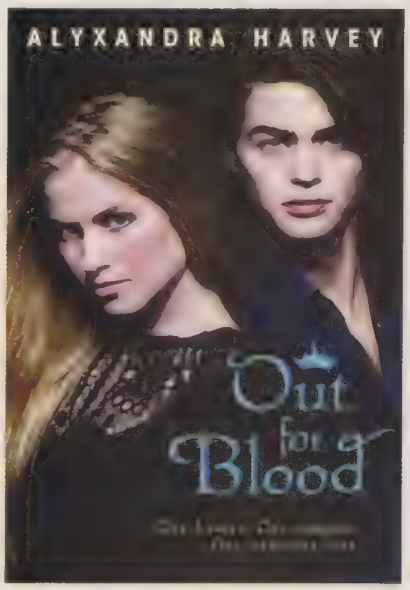
Meghan Chase, the half-Fae daughter of Summer King Oberon, is ready to return to mortal life with her boyfriend, the exiled Winter Prince Ash, when the two are pulled back into the ongoing war between the old Faerie Courts and the newly-emerged Iron Fae. With a new Iron King poised to destroy Summer and Winter and remake Faery in his image, only Meghan, with her unique blend of abilities, has what it takes to stop him. With an unlikely group of fractious allies, she must accomplish the impossible at any cost, even her own life. Romance takes a back seat to high stakes action as the war in Faery takes its toll and leaves its mark. This third installment in the series is just as compelling and complex as its predecessors, and wholly satisfying.

***The Painted Boy*, by Charles de Lint, (Viking, hardcover, 448 pages, $18.99, ISBN 978-0-670-01191-9)**

When the enigmatic James Li comes to the Arizona town of Santo del Vado Viejo, he finds new friends, and new enemies. One of the Yellow Dragon Clan, he's in the process of embracing his true nature and destiny. To do that, he'll need to find his own limits while battling the drug dealers and gangbangers terrorizing the town, as well as winning over the locals and resident spirits. It all comes down to an epic clash of magic, emotion and music, in de Lint's uniquely addictive style. Rich language, lush descriptions, complex situations and the intricate blending of mythologies and beliefs demonstrate why de Lint is still considered a master of the genre. It rarely gets better than this.



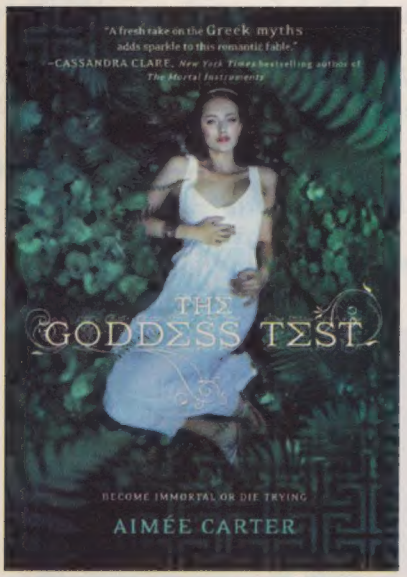
***Out For Blood*, by Alyxandra Harvey, (Bloomsbury, trade paperback, 292 pages, $9.99, ISBN 978-0-8027-2168-6)**



Hunter Wild comes from a family of vampire hunters, and is a rising star student at the Helios-Ra Academy, which trains people like her. Despite that, she's fast becoming friends with the vampiric Drake family, who'd rather forge a peaceful alliance with her people, than snack on humans. As feral, cannibalistic vampires threaten both sides, and a mysterious illness strikes the Helios-Ra student body, Hunter has

to team up with the flirtatious Quinn Drake to combat a mutual foe. Soon, they're falling for one another, even as they fight for their lives. Humor, action, and romance blend together perfectly in this series, while sharp characterization and an underlying sense of pure fun make this book a joy to read.

***The Goddess Test*, by Aimee Carter, (Harlequin Teen, trade paperback, 304 pages, $9.99, ISBN 978-0-373-21026-8)**


"A fresh take on the Greek myths adds sparkle to this romantic fable."
—CASSANDRA CLARE, New York Times bestselling author of The Mortal Instruments
THE GODDESS TEST
BECOME IMMORTAL OR DIE TRYING
AIMÉE CARTER

Kate has just moved to the tiny town of Eden, so her dying mother can return home for the last time. Soon, Kate experiences several bizarre events, ending with her making a deal with Henry, the self-proclaimed god of the dead. In return for her mother getting a few more months of life, Kate must stay with Henry, while undergoing a series of tests. Pass, and she'll rule the underworld by his side. Fail, like all those who tried before her, and perish. Now Kate has to do everything in her power to pass, even though she doesn't want to spend her life in the realm of the dead. Reality and fantasy blend seamlessly as she's further drawn into a world where the Greek gods are real, where she's meant to be the new Persephone, and where appearances are deceiving. It's an intriguingly romantic, heartfelt twist on an old set of myths, with plenty of potential for future offerings.

***Fallen Angel*, by Heather Terrell, (Harper Teen, trade paperback, 310 pages, $8.99, ISBN 978-0-06-196570-8)**

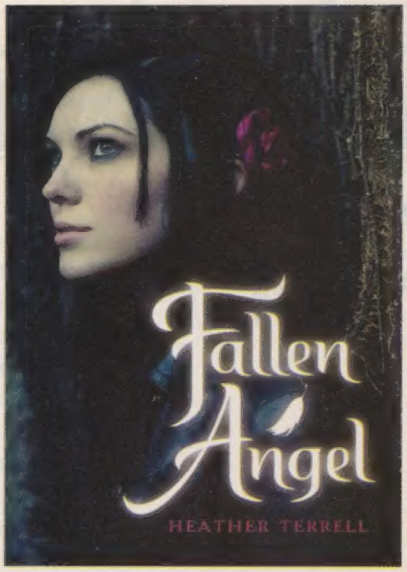
When Ellie meets Michael, they discover an immediate connection, and a mutual attraction. To their surprise, they both possess superhuman powers, including flight, persuasion, and an affinity for blood. They're not vampires, but something much older, and their parents have hidden the truth all their lives. Now, as the manipulative Ezekiel comes to exploit them for his own shadowy agenda, they're determined to uncover the truth on their own.. But will what they learn strengthen their love, or tear them apart? While we've seen a number of forbidden love/fallen angel-themed books of late, this one's pretty strong, taking some unexpected twists along the way. It'll be interesting to see what happens next.

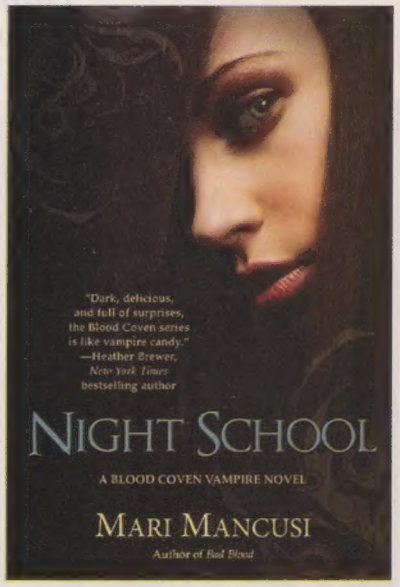
***Night School*, by Mari Mancusi, (Berkley Books, trade paperback, 244 pages, $9.99, ISBN 978-0-425-24042-7)**

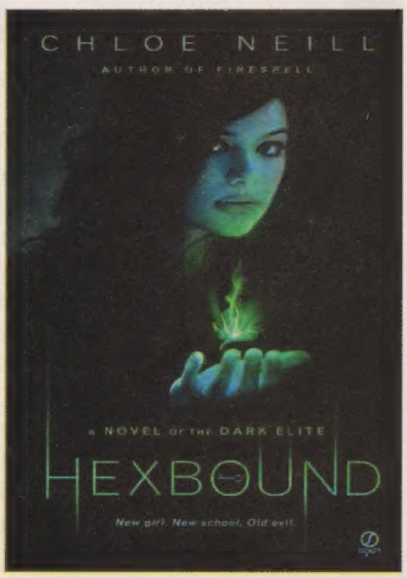
Twins Sunny and Rayne are anything but normal. They're both dating vampires, while Rayne is both vampire and slayer at the same time. And now, according to their parents, they're both fairy princesses ... and that part of the family's come to collect them. For their own safety, the girls are sent to stay at the remote Riverdale Academy, a school for slayers. As Riverdale proves full of surprises, Rayne's forced to hide her true nature with no way to feed. With fairies, vampires, and traitors galore, disaster is inevitable. Only Mancusi could make this increasingly bizarre set of circumstances work so well, as one twist after another is introduced. The end result is a past-paced, quirky, fun continuation of the series that's sure to keep fans amused.

***Hexbound*, by Chloe Neill, (Signet, paperback, 246 pages, $6.99, ISBN 978-0-451-23079-9)**

Struggling to master her newfound magical abilities, Lily continues to work with the Adepts, a secret group of mages dedicated to protecting the innocent and battling the Reapers, mages who exploit others for power. With Chicago as their battleground, the two factions clash repeatedly. Meanwhile, stranger things than mages are stalking the streets at night, threatening to cause real trouble. Lily's also determined to uncover her parents' secrets, and still find time to date her werewolf boyfriend. With so much on the line, something's bound to give. With an interesting premise and a host of memorable characters, this series fails to disappoint. I'm looking forward to each new entry.




"Dark, delicious, and full of surprises, the Blood Coven series is like vampire candy."
—Heather Brewer, New York Times bestselling author
NIGHT SCHOOL
A BLOOD COVEN VAMPIRE NOVEL
MARI MANCUSI
Author of Bad Blood

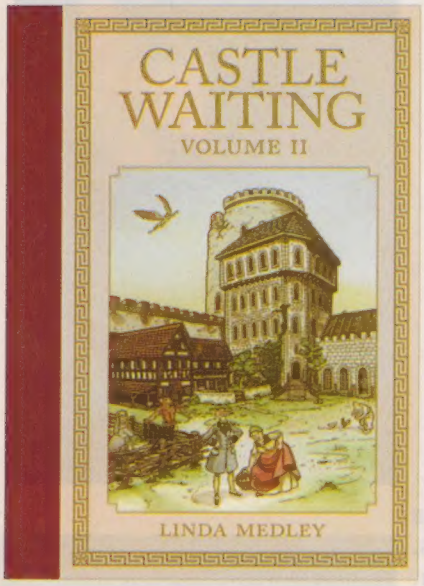


Graphic Novels

by Andrew Wheeler

Fantasy can certainly be deep and serious, commenting on Important Issues and tackling Big Ideas – or just long and convoluted and entirely too serious. It can be dark and creepy, reveling in the creatures of the shadows and the things that go bump in the night. But, sometimes, it's much happier and full of sunshine than that – and, unfortunately for my hopes of matching this issue's theme – this is one of *those* times in the lands of fantasy graphic novels.

***Castle Waiting, Vol. II* by Linda Medley (Fantagraphics, hardcover, 378 pages, $29.99, ISBN 978-1-60699-405-4)**



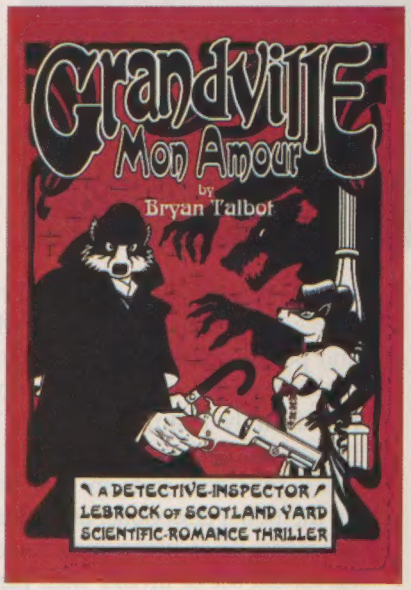
Linda Medley has been writing sweet, lovely stories about a medieval castle long past its fairy-tale moment of fame for more than a decade now, and those stories have gotten, if anything, even quieter and more domestic as they've gone along. A prologue, "The Curse of Brambly Hedge," explained how that castle once housed Sleeping Beauty – and how she left, never to return, as soon as her prince arrived with a kiss. The rest of the series has been set much later, and followed a young noblewoman, Lady Jain, as she traveled to and settled into Castle Waiting. There's very little to compare to *Castle Waiting* in fantasy in any form: it's more comprehensively domestic than any other work I know.

The first collection of the series included the prologue and Lady Jain's arrival – plus the birth of her son, and quite a bit of flashback about an order of bearded nuns – and so it had some action to it. This second book, which collects the eleven issues of the most recent run of the *Castle Waiting* comic, is entirely more sedate: the big organizing event is that Jain wants to move into another part of the castle, which leads to lots of exploring, plan-making, and, more than anything else, talking. *Castle Waiting* is a gently feminist series, showing the quiet, unappreciated side of fairy tales and of women's lives, and so those conversations and connections are important. More important, actually, than fighting and making money and all those other masculine pursuits – here, those take place offstage, far away, and the men that come off best are the ones who can build, or take care of children, or tell good stories.

As always, Medley's art is precise, almost gem-like, with special emphasis on her characters' faces – this is a quiet, warm story about people, and it's the people that are the most important. For readers who can slow down to appreciate it, *Castle Waiting* is well worth the wait.

***Grandville Mon Amour* by Bryan Talbot (Dark Horse, hardcover, 108 pages, $19.99, ISBN 978-1-59582-574-2)**

Bryan Talbot, on the other hand, *loves* adventure – but he doesn't take it all that seriously. This particular book – the second in a series, after Grandville – is set in an alternate-historical world in which not only did Napoleon win the wars that bore his name and conquered England in the name of France, but he did it in a world where nearly all of the people are anthropomorphic animals. (And did I mention it's steampunk, too? It's steampunk, too.) Two hundred years later, England has been free for nearly a generation, after a long campaign of resistance, but political tensions with the still-dominant French empire obviously remain.



Detective-Inspector LeBrock of Scotland Yard – the large, burly badger on the cover – would prefer to have nothing to do with politics, but, as always with tough, smart detectives in popular fiction, his cases keep snaking their way into the corridors of power, and he continually has to clean up high-level messes to bring the guilty to justice. This time around, he's on the trail of an incredibly dangerous escaped mass murderer, and that trail leads to Paris (aka "Grandville"), perhaps mostly to justify the series title. Talbot

has some fun with the expected tropes of the high-stakes detective thriller, as LeBrock's boss throws him off the case early on, and his investigations, inevitably, lead to something very much like a nasty conspiracy at the highest levels of power.

Luckily, there's no problem that a determined badger detective can't handle, given his wits, his fists, and enough firepower. The *Grandville* stories are unabashed entertainments: big, bold, knowingly winking at their genre conventions at the same time as they barrel straight forward through those conventions. And *Grandville Mon Amour* is just as brash and thrilling as the first book, a bracing left hook of a graphic novel.

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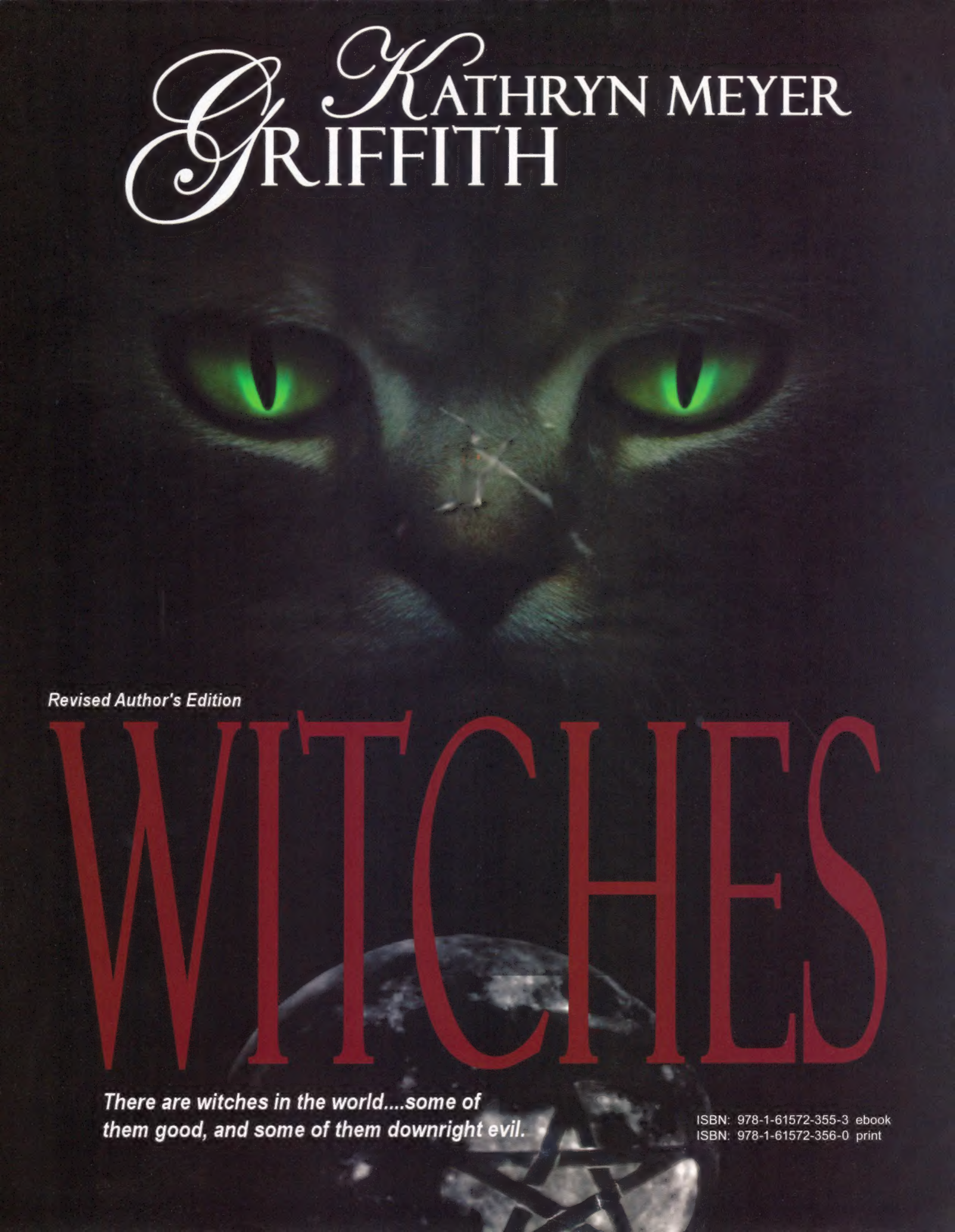
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